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水城正太郎

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT12

HJ文庫
HOBBY JAPAN

いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT12

「だから、あなたは何者かにはなれなかったんだよ……」
「さよなら……」

「なっ……何を……！」
「動くな。ヘムヘムなんだから、脱ぐのは当然だろ？」

登場人物紹介

服部絢子（はっとりじゅんこ）

阿九斗に恋する純情なクラス委員長。「色のない炎」によって焼かれてしまう。

紗伊阿九斗（さいあくと）

けーなの支配下に置かれているが、必然的に戦争に関わることに。絢子を焼いた「力」に対し激しく憤る。

江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。真の黒魔術の再興を目指している。

曽我けーな（そが）

日本の現皇帝陛下。世界のカギを握る存在？　果たしてその正体は？

三輪寛（みわひろし）

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なっていたが、けーなの皇帝即位後はその御側係に。いたずら好き。

木多淑恵（きたよしえ）
魔王戦争の後、阿九斗のことを気に入り、協力する。
マリン
共和国の王子。「無貌の力」を開放してしまう。
リリィ白石（しらいし）
小粋な帽子がトレードマークの生徒会長。
ノニモラ
マーライ族の族長。「無貌の力」を守る使命を担っていた。
佐倉啓（さくらけい）
CIMO8の一人。阿九斗の細胞の一部を使い魔王化する。
ザ・ワン
CIMO8の一人。今回の事件の首謀者。その狙いは？
倉橋賢人（くらはしけんと）
CIMO8の一人。「無貌の力」を利用しようとするが、ザ・ワンに出し抜かれる。

Prologue

Laws and morals were different, but only those in power could truly proclaim that fact. As a general principle, laws were to be determined by morals, but those very laws were supported by immoral violence.

That fact hit home with Kurahashi Kento as he witnessed an action that opposed the law.

That understanding may have been due to his mind working at several times the rate of a normal person's. Someone else would likely have been petrified at the sight.

No blood had been shed and no change had come over her appearance, but she had certainly lost her life.

Her beauty remained, but her eyes were opened wide and all light had vanished from her pupils. The loss of strength from her muscles left her jaw hanging loose and her limbs dangling limply. She hung down near the ceiling like a hanged corpse, but there was no rope around her slender neck. She floated in the air and an invisible power held her there.

A single girl stood below that corpse.

She wore a white dress and looked up at the corpse with a bright smile.

She stared up at what had been her stepsister.

"I just got rid of her a bit. She was in the way. She was ignoring me and trying to have fun on her own. How could I allow that?"

—Trying to have fun?

Kento contemplated what the girl had said while turning back toward him.

The dead…no, murdered girl was named Katayama Madoka. She had been his lover and that was undoubtedly what this girl meant by "trying to have fun". Was she disgusted by the sexual pleasure so commonly seen during puberty? Whether that was the case or not, her words were likely based in jealousy.

—Jealousy?

However, Kento knew that could not be the case. He was one of the few people who knew this "girl" was actually a boy who anyone would think looked like a girl.

His name was Sakura Kei.

After his parents had died, Madoka had taken him in and raised him as her younger brother. Of course, she had done so out of more than pure good will.

Kei had abnormal talent in magic.

Mana reacted to the state of one's mind, but that mana was nothing more than nanomachines that were made to mechanically react to brainwaves. The effect the brain waves produced in the mana depended on the image in the individual's head. Some visual images and some special combinations of words functioned as triggers, but a lot about magic was still unexplained. For that reason, magical talent was essentially an inborn trait.

Madoka and Kento had been a pair of top class researchers in the field of magic, but that barrier had prevented their research from progressing past that point. Once they had thoroughly investigated their own inborn talent, they could only search out a new talented individual.

Kei's parents had died when he was young and he had been left with an orphanage. That orphanage had contacted Kento's laboratory via a church to report that Kei had used magic when he was still too young to even speak.

When Madoka and Kento had arrived to investigate, they had been told no one had taught Kei how to use magic. Their investigation had confirmed that he had indeed controlled mana to throw a toy at a friend's head.

Neither Madoka nor Kento knew at whose ear the demon had whispered, but it had not even taken a week for the two of them to pull some strings, have Madoka legally adopt him, and begin to raise him as her younger brother.

Kei had quickly displayed how unique he was. He had created many different original pieces of magic. Even when they had the same effects as traditional magic, the details were always changed in some way. This was to be expected, though. In the few years since he had come to the lab, no

one had been allowed to provide him any education, magical or otherwise. He had been raised with an emphasis on individuality.

However, his uniqueness had shown itself in all parts of his life. He had behaved however he liked and Madoka and Kento had been forced to allow it because his value had lain in his mental state. However, his wild side had exceeded simple open-mindedness and his behavior had grown highly abnormal. Once he had developed a powerful healing magic, he had made a "game" of injuring Madoka and healing her. That was but one of many examples.

It had all been for the sake of developing unique magic, but the sacrifices had been great. They had later taught him not to do to others what he would not want done to himself, but it had been too late. That had simply made him prove he was able to sever his own arm without batting an eye.

His magic had eventually reached the point of modifying his own body. Essentially, he had performed cosmetic surgery on himself. As he had grown, he had grown more beautiful. During puberty, he had become a mixture of the feminine and the masculine. His beauty had been enough to mesmerize any who saw him. Even Kento and Madoka who had been used to seeing him would find themselves captivated by his appearance.

At the time, they should have realized he would only be growing more beautiful if he intended to use that beauty for his own convenience.

He had gradually gained more freedom. In the beginning, they had planned to slowly educate him and return him to a normal lifestyle, but the pace of that normalization had been much faster than Kento had expected. In fact, he had a feeling Kei himself was putting together the research schedule.

Nevertheless, Kei had been obedient around Kento, so it had taken him several years to grasp the situation. He did not learn what had been happening behind the scenes until Madoka had died and he heard it directly from Kei.

"You and my sister never caught on until the end, but why didn't you when I was doing this specifically so you would notice?"

Kei's words contradicted themselves.

"What…did you do?" asked Kento.

Kei laughed.

"I fucked everyone on the research staff."

"Fucked…? Wait. You mean…"

"I had sex with them. I could use magic just a bit better than any of you expected. I would need to read and control their minds to do that."

Kei sounded perfectly calm, but Kento was completely shaken.

He had realized the staff was being influenced by Kei's attraction, but he had never even considered it had developed that far. This was partially due to his own distance from that type of thing, but the large number of men on the staff was an even larger reason.

"You can't mean…"

"I do. You can't think about me like a normal purpose. That's the entire point."

"Then…"

"When it comes to beauty, the differences between male and female are meaningless. In fact, it's completely natural for a beautiful boy to love both men and women. I've been studying history, and the moral standard that only a man and women can have sex was a later addition."

Kei gave a bewitching smile.

"Surely you can make a counterargument against this being my skill in magic. I think the only thing I used mana for was to make myself beautiful. Reading and controlling their minds was done with a more traditional kind of magic. Instead of using mana, I read their minds from their actions and words and I seduced them. It's an old way of saying it, but they used to call that the magic of love."

Kento was left utterly speechless and Kei wrapped his arms around Kento's neck.

"You're the only one it didn't work on, but that's exactly why I want to work hard and win you over. Do you know what I mean?"

Kento trembled as he felt terror wash over him for the first time in his life.

—I've created a monster!

But that was not what scared him.

The fear came from that monster turning interest and good will toward him.

—I might be able to control this monster. No, only I can control him.

"I can't believe I didn't notice how you felt."

Kento took Kei's hand.

If someone had ever actually made a deal with the devil, it had to have happened much like this.

Chapter 1: The Prelude to Destruction is Always Silent

From the look on Morlock's face, it was clear he had instantly lost all confidence.

He was trembling and sweating.

However, those standard changes went farther than normal.

Sweat poured down his face without end and that sweat was scattered about by his intense trembling.

The sight that had so badly scared such a skilled spy was Akuto. The boy's expression was truly demonic. The usual attractiveness of his face made it all the more frightening now that it was twisted with pure and undiluted intent to kill.

"I was trying to find a good enough reason to kill you…and now I've found it."

As Akuto spoke, all mana vanished from the surrounding area. Even if it was in small quantities, mana existed in all parts of the atmosphere, so its disappearance meant Akuto had instantly gathered it all in his hand.

"Impossible!" shouted Morlock without thinking.

Even the most powerful magic users were unable to accomplish anything like that. Moving the energy that allowed mana to function was one thing, but moving the mana itself required the mental power to grasp the locations of each and every particle.

Akuto moved his finger ever so slightly.

That was enough to pin Morlock in the air and pull him forward as if by magnetism.

"Please don't kill me!"

"Don't kill him!"

Two voices overlapped.

One belonged to Morlock and the other to Keena.

"Don't kill. An excellent sentiment. And I would prefer to not have to kill."

Keena's expression relaxed in relief.

But those words sounded crueler than a death sentence to Morlock who had experienced many brutal battles in the past. After all, not a single bit of the cruelty had left Akuto's face.

"P-please stop! Please forgive me!"

Morlock pleaded until he was hoarse, but Akuto rejected his pleas with a wave of his right hand.

"If you're going to beg for forgiveness, don't attack others in the first place!"

The man's body began to shrink. He specialized in doing just that, but he was not causing it this time.

"P-please stop!"

When Morlock shrank, his body did not actually reduce in size. He would send most of his body into a virtual alternate dimension and reform his body with mana. However, Akuto was using that against him.

"Gyaaaaah!"

His scream trailed on and on as his body grew smaller and smaller.

Akuto sealed Morlock in the virtual alternate dimension and set his size at no bigger than a few dozen mana particles.

The minimized Morlock looked like he had been drawn by filling in squares of graph paper and he could not even speak.

"Eeeeee!" shrieked Morlock in the virtual alternate dimension.

However, that shout did not reach the real world.

All he could see in reality was a microscopic colorless world. Dust floated like asteroids and wind blew him around with greater speed than a storm and greater thickness than seawater. At this rate, he would be unable to speak with anyone as he lived in this lonely world for as long as mana existed.

Soon thereafter, he was swept away by the wind and disappeared to some unknown place.

"A-chan… What…what did you do?" asked Keena worriedly.

"I sealed him in a virtual alternate dimension and made his body microscopic."

Akuto's tone was calm, but his words contained great heat. His anger had yet to cool.

"A…-chan…"

Keena shuddered and a mixture of fear and sorrow filled her voice.

"Y-you can't do that…"

"I didn't kill him. I did as you said," he explained coolly.

"No… That wasn't what I said to do. Surely you understand! You wouldn't normally do that kind of mean thing to me!"

Keena was crying and confusion filled Akuto's eyes.

"But he's working with the person who killed Junko!"

His voice was so rough that Keena could not say anything.

A heavy silence followed, but Korone suddenly interrupted.

"I will not argue against vengeance, but do you truly understand the situation?"

As a L'Isle-Adam, Korone was calm and she was right about Akuto not being the same. It was also possible he did not fully understand the situation.

"The situation? What's there to understand? The person who caused all this is over there!"

He pointed toward The One's flying ship.

Akuto understood that a member of CIMO 8 and the representative of the Republic were onboard and he could guess that Marine had used the Formless Power. However, the conclusion he reached was far from normal.

He would attack that ship and defeat the two of them.

That was the one and only conclusion in his mind.

He was being motivated by nothing but anger.

"Ohhhhh!" he roared.

He kicked off the ground and that was enough to whip up the wind.

Keena and Korone covered their faces.

"Don't!"

By the time Keena shouted, Akuto was already far into the sky. She could see him flying directly toward the ship while enveloped in a shockwave.

"Empress, please seal the demon king's power," astutely instructed Korone.

"Right," agreed Keena.

She had forgotten, but the empress had the ability to seal the demon king's – and therefore Akuto's – power. She had been using that ability to release his powers when necessary, but now she felt it was more necessary to seal them.

"As empress, I seal the demon king's-…"

She started her proclamation, but trailed off and looked at her hands in confusion.

"What is it?" asked Korone.

"H-huh? I-I can't do it."

She shook her head as if it would bring back the sensation she had felt previously.

"You can't do it?" repeated Korone.

"Eh? Not now! This is the one time I actually need it! C'mon! C'mon!"

She waved her hands around a few times, but nothing happened.

"You can't use the imperial power?" muttered Korone.

She was not simply restating the problem. She was thinking about what the source of that imperial power was.

—The Formless Power.

That was supposedly a power of the mind that existed independent of mana and it was apparently the collective consciousness of some sort of life form.

Keena's inability to use it meant she could not access the Formless Power, but there was no way of knowing if it was due to an internal factor or an external factor.

"Why? I want to stop A-chan! I need to stop him just this once!"

Keena's shouts vanished futilely into the sky as Akuto approached the flying ship. Physical bullets and energy bullets poured down on him, but he completely ignored them.

A small pillar of smoke rose from one side of the disk-shaped ship and he easily broke through its armor.

Marine was horrified by what he himself had done.

He had chosen to use the Formless Power, but he had never expected this result.

He had used the power to stop the nuclear weapon, but a portion of the imperial coast had utterly vanished.

"The Formless Power reacts well to a collective consciousness," explained The One. "The people of the Republic greatly wished for this."

He looked like a speaking dog, but he claimed to be a thought entity using the dog as its host. At the moment, that alien seemed just like a demon. He had predicted this result and yet had Marine use the Formless Power.

"You tricked me!" shouted Marine.

But The One only laughed.

"Ha ha ha! If you give power to a living being, it will always lead to the same result."

"If you claim this wasn't a trick, what do you call it!?"

In that instant, Marine gave up on negotiating with The One.

He accelerated forward to punch the dog in the face.

But…

—Why!?

His body would not budge. He could not move forward or even raise his fist. He felt as if he were caught in a sea of thick mud.

"Ha ha!" laughed The One. "This is much like hypnotism! When I saved you, I made sure you can do anything but attack me. It's important to be careful when facing someone as powerful as you."

"You gave me an implant!?"

It was impossible to control someone's mind with normal magic, but there was a single exception: implanting a device inside their body where their mana control was strongest.

"You catch on quickly. I won't completely take your will from you, though. After all, I need you to use the Formless Power."

"Kh," groaned Marine. "You're going to have me use it again!? But this has already made a world war unavoidable!"

"It is true I succeeded in causing a world war, but my goal lies even further than that."

The One smiled.

"There's more?"

Marine's face twisted in further fear. He had never considered this dog was plotting more than just a world war.

"That's right. I will destroy the world in an unexpected fashion," said The One coldly. "To do that, I must have you continue to use the Formless Power. I need your subjects to do more work for me."

Suddenly an alarm sounded and the side of the ship was destroyed.

Both of their expressions changed to confusion.

After boarding the ship with overwhelming power, Akuto appeared from beyond the broken pieces and smoke.

This normally unthinkable sight left both The One and Marine speechless. Abnormal was the only word to describe this boy who had approached almost before the alarm could sound, broke cleanly through several dozen walls, and then casually walked inside.

"Don't bother trying to justify your actions," said Akuto.

His voice was so low it was almost a growl.

Marine felt his blood run cold yet also felt as if he were fascinated by the boy. The fear was so great that it transformed into a sort of attraction.

The same went for The One.

"I see you've come to deliver death, cursed one!"

The One's shout held fear and some amount of praise, but his actions were those of someone driven solely by fear. With the Jewel Branch of Hourai in his mouth, he quickly jumped onto the seat shaped like a dog bed.

"I am not senile enough to face you head on!"

The entire cockpit was closed off by a shutter and a change in air pressure could be heard on the other side. The cockpit had likely been ejected from the flying ship.

Normally, Akuto would likely have pursued The One and broken through the shutter, but he was far from sensible at the moment.

His actions had no advance warning.

"You killed Junko!"

He mindlessly charged toward Marine and launched an attack.

Marine moved his hands to deflect the attack, but the surging pressure was too great.

He immediately used the Formless Power.

The light of compressed mana and a different blinding light burst between the two of them.

"Kh!"

"Gh!"

They both groaned and put some distance between each other.

Heat seemed to hang in the air between the two of them.

"That power!" Akuto raised his voice. "Is that the power you used to kill Junko!?"

"This…power…"

Marine looked at his hands in confusion. He had indeed used a power different from his own to fight and that power was the one which the Republic's people had used to burn away a portion of land.

It was the Formless Power.

That mysterious power was activated by a human will and brought about incredible destruction.

Also, it was a forbidden power that The One had urged him to use.

He had indeed felt his own will activate that power and he understood it had been his fear of Akuto and his sense of self-preservation that had led him to do so.

"Was it that malice you used to kill her!?" roared Akuto.

He obtained a tremendous burst of power that surged out as physical pressure.

A sphere of mana burst out from Akuto.

"Gwoh!"

Marine used the Formless Power once more because his body would have been torn apart by the shockwave otherwise.

As proof, the flying ship exploded from the inside.

Marine did not want to think about how great a force it would have taken to accomplish that. A flying battleship like that had armor almost as thick as a tank, but it had burst like a balloon.

However, he did not want to think about how much power he himself had used either. The Formless Power had easily shielded him from so much power.

Pieces of the ship scattered around them and fell.

Only the two of them remained intact at the center of the explosion.

Marine's feelings concerning the Formless Power were complex.

That Formless Power had rivaled Akuto's mana, so Marine had the power to fight the boy. He would have died without it, but he doubted such a great power would come without a price and he recalled what The One had said.

"Stop! We should not be fighting!"

However, his shouted protest did not stop Akuto.

"Ohhh!" the boy roared and charged forward.

Marine remained calm and could easily evade even if he could not compete in power.

Even so, he chose to receive the attack.

"Nh!"

The two of them clashed head-on and their colliding powers created an explosive noise.

The impacts distorted their faces.

However, Akuto maintained his momentum and continued launching his fists forward.

"Ohhhhhh!"

Countless fists rained down on Marine, but the man received them all head-on.

And he did so with his own mana rather than the Formless Power.

"Gah!" he groaned.

He guarded with a mana-fortified arm, but Akuto poured all his strength into that arm.

In no time, tremendous damage accumulated in the arm.

"So this is your anger and your grudge," groaned Marine.

He was vaguely aware that he was using this to punish himself. The Formless Power was indeed something humans should not toy with.

Marine's attitude caused Akuto to stop his barrage of fists for an instant.

"What are you doing?" asked Akuto.

"A proper man only loses his cool when a relative or lover is killed, so I assumed that was the case for you now. But you also appeared to be the kind of man who can bear the weight of a nation, so I felt it was my duty to be punched by you until you calm down and we can talk as equals."

Akuto replied by letting out a quiet breath, but his anger was far from gone.

He raised his fist and shouted out.

"In that case, take it without guarding! I'll end it in a single blow!"

He was being unreasonable, but the demon king's words were persuasive.

Marine lowered his guarding arm without thinking.

"Kh!"

He was prepared. If this would be the final blow, that was for the best. This was his punishment for being deceived.

However, the expected impact never arrived.

"Don't!"

A high-pitched voice slipped between the two of them.

Akuto's fist stopped and Marine's body stiffened.

This had been entirely unpredictable, so the two of them had easily been caught off guard.

Nonimora slipped between them and kissed Akuto.

"Wha-…?"

The softness of her lips robbed Akuto of all strength and the flames of hatred vanished from his eyes.

Marine was utterly dumbfounded.

Nonimora then rotated around in midair and stole Marine's lips as well. She acted with magnificent speed.

"Don't get so worked up, boys."

After moving from Marine's lips, she pointed at both of them.

"Muchu-muchu is the best way to stop a fight."

Akuto and Marine were completely taken aback, but Marine recovered more quickly. He was likely more accustomed to women than Akuto.

"Please understand," he said. "I want to talk."

Akuto had lost his chance to attack, so he stared silently back.

"You need to calm down," said Nonimora. "When the Formless Power is activated by an evil heart, it becomes an evil power. What matters is whose evil heart that is."

Marine's expression changed.

"That is the same as I had heard. I understand your anger, but my people are the true target of your anger. That is also why I must apologize."

His expression was one of partial despair.

"Your people are the target of my anger?"

Akuto was beginning to calm down and his naturally sharp intuition was returning, so he understood what that likely meant.

"Are you saying it was the hatred in people's hearts that burnt away that land?" he asked.

"Most likely," affirmed Marine quietly.

Akuto understood the meaning behind the man's expression.

"Kh."

He clenched his teeth in anger that had no outlet.

"The Formless Power acts based on everyone's wills," declared Nonimora. "But you freed it, so some responsibility lies with you."

Marine nodded.

"I trusted my people. Think of that as foolish if you wish. I believe I have done something inexcusable, but I did save the land from a nuclear weapon. I want you to understand that it was a good power as well."

Akuto shook his head.

"How am I supposed to accept that? And if so, what are we supposed to do?"

"We can only hope that the good power surpasses the evil."

Marine's voice made it clear he did not believe it himself.

"A-chan…"

Keena had watched the entire series of events from the ground.

That of course included Nonimora kissing Akuto.

She understood it had been unavoidable given the situation, but it still made her chest ache.

If someone was going to kiss him to calm him down, she had wanted it to be her. Having someone else steal that role had been more of a shock than she had thought it would be.

"Shall we let that native have it later?" asked Korone who stood next to Keena.

She was likely being considerate in her own way, but Keena could not smile.

"We can't do that."

"I see. Unfortunate."

"It is not unfortunate."

Keena sighed and the other three descended from the sky.

A gloomy atmosphere filled the air.

Akuto and Marine's mouths were shut tight and Nonimora's expression was grim.

"A-chan."

Keena called out to him, but he only gave a quick nod.

"Will you be pursuing The One?" asked Korone.

"We have no other choice," replied Akuto. "He stole the Jewel Branch of Hourai and we can't even seal away the Formless Power without it."

He glanced over at Marine.

The man did not actually nod, but he agreed with Akuto.

"I think that would be best. We must seal that power as soon as possible."

"Even though it has made you so powerful?"

Akuto turned a suspicious eye toward him because he could rival Akuto in a fight when using the Formless Power, but he once more agreed with Akuto.

"It should be sealed away. I still hope that my people can use it as a power of good, but The One said he will destroy the world in an unexpected fashion and that he must have me continue to use the Formless Power to do so."

The look on Marine's face was sincere. Akuto's expression did not relax, but he verbally agreed.

"Then let's pursue him and seal away the Formless Power once we retrieve the Jewel Branch of Hourai."

"I will help you, but there is a problem." Marine sounded apologetic. "I have an implant that prevents me from attacking him."

"An implant?"

Akuto did not know much about that, so Korone explained it for him.

"A small machine is inserted in their body to brainwash them using close range control of their mana. It is a troublesome method."

She pulled an X-ray device from her bag and held it up to Marine.

"Give me a moment."

The monitor of the speed gun shaped device displayed the inside of his stomach. A small capsule-like silhouette was visible deep inside.

"I could easily remove the implant with my surgical tools, but there would be some mental danger," she explained.

Most implants had traps in place in case of external contact. The type that actually exploded was a problem, but the ones that applied mind-influencing magic were even more dangerous.

"I can handle an implant," suddenly said Nonimora.

"What do you mean?" asked Korone.

The girl nodded confidently.

"We have long taught about implants and how to remove them."

"Come to think of it, your village has preserved some lost techniques."

"You don't do this anymore? If you remove the trap while having hem-hem, it can't affect the mind as much."

She puffed her chest out proudly.

"That truly is a mystery of life," said Korone in understanding.

"I'll do it! Come over here, good looking!"

Nonimora beckoned Marine over.

She was oddly nonchalant about it, but Akuto and the others knew what hem-hem meant in that village.

"Are you serious?" asked Akuto.

"Don't be rude. Of course I'm serious," said Nonimora with a serious expression. "But you shouldn't show it off to too many people outside of a festival, so we'll go to that thicket over there."

"Eh? Wait…"

Akuto and Marine both spoke up in confusion, but Korone and Nonimora grabbed Marine from either side and took him toward the thicket.

"Well, if you can remove the implant, I will do what you say."

Marine still sounded confused, but he stepped past the thicket.

Akuto and Keena were unsure what to do after being left alone.

Everyone was being perfectly serious, but the situation seemed too ridiculous.

Both of them were exhausted, so they sat down.

Voices could be heard beyond the thicket.

"When should I remove the implant?"

"Perform the surgery when his mind is focused on the hem-hem."

Marine seemed to still not know what hem-hem was.

"Hem-hem?"

"You don't know about it? Well, it doesn't matter. Just stay still."

Finally, Marine shouted in surprise.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

"Don't move. We're having hem-hem, so I'm taking off my clothes."

"Taking off your clothes? But why?"

"Because we're having hem-hem. Weren't you listening?"

"What? Is that any reason to start taking off my pants?"

"Could you be a little more cooperative? Hem-hem is a two-person job."

Nonimora sounded completely nonchalant, but then Marine shouted out in shock.

"Wait! Don't tell me hem-hem is what I think it is!"

"Hem-hem is hem-hem. Just stay still. We'll get rid of that implant."

"But I don't see the connection between this and the implant."

"I already explained it. You need to focus your mind."

It was unclear whether that convinced him or not, but Marine stopped shouting.

"But I am a prince."

"That doesn't matter. With men, other people can't tell if you've done it or not."

"But what about you?"

"I'm perfectly healthy. I don't have any diseases. Or are you saying you do?"

"No, but…"

"Then there's nothing to worry about. And this is a safe day, so I won't get pon-pon. Now then…huh? It isn't very baki-baki."

"W-well, given the situation…"

"Let go! That's rude to the girl. I'll make sure you're nice and ready, so be thankful!"

"Hyah…ah…"

From there, quiet rustling sounds and muffled whispering could be heard.

"When exactly should I remove the implant?"

"He'll have to tell you. Do it at the climax."

"At the climax?"

"When he goes glop-glop."

While Akuto sat and listened to those voices, a bitter smile covered his face. The entire atmosphere had changed.

"What is even going on anymore?" he muttered.

This may have been a special trait of Nonimora's and she had definitely saved him. If she had not interfered, he would likely have killed Marine.

"Hey, A-chan."

He heard a voice from the side and found Keena leaning up against him.

"What is it?"

"You know…"

She fidgeted and twisted around.

Seductive breathing and rhythmical rustling of clothing could be heard from the thicket. Hearing it was unavoidable as they sat silently.

"No, I don't know. So…um…"

He trailed off and Keena began to move. She wrapped her arms around him, raised her head, and peered into his eyes.

"A-chan…"

She pursed her lips.

He knew what that meant. This was related to what Nonimora had done, but he had also known for a long time what Keena wanted.

However…

Keena's body had always given him a sense of peace, but now it felt horribly heavy. It was partially due to feeling guilty about betraying her wishes during the incident with Morlock, but it was also because he had lost Junko, someone else he loved.

Keena closed her eyes.

The sweet voices from the thicket were impossible to ignore.

Keena seemed to have been influenced by the situation and she had a desiring look on her face, but he felt some opposition to that expression.

"No."

He was not sure what exactly he was saying "no" to, but he spoke anyways.

Keena looked sad and opened her eyes.

"Sorry. But…well…"

He shook his head.

Suddenly, a bursting sound came from within Keena as if a bubble had been blown by a slight wind.

He looked toward her in surprise and found a strange look in her eyes.

"Great sadness is likely coming. Your mistake is one you have been making for a long time."

He recognized that calm voice.

It was the being that had referred to herself as the Law of Identity.

"Keena?"

"The girl you refer to by that name is me yet not me," she replied. "Especially now."

"Why did you appear now?" he asked.

The Law of Identity sounded sad as she answered.

"Because her heart could not bear it any longer. That answer is likely the closest to the truth."

"But I…"

He tried to rebut her without thinking, but she continued before he could.

"This is your mistake. Up until now and also at this very moment, you have continued to make a very small mistake. You entrusted your thoughts to me and did not oppose the flow of events even as you opposed the expectations of the people. This is the result. I pray that you do not make this mistake next time."

She did not blame him or rebuke him. She merely spoke the truth.

He did not understand what she meant. Or rather, he did not want to understand. It was a tad abrupt, but she was certainly speaking about his own sin.

This Law of Identity had saved him a few times in the past: both when Yamato Bouichirou had been performing his ritual with her and when he had remained on the moon with Zero. However, she had now made a sudden appearance and started questioning him.

"My mistake? I don't think I've let myself be swept away by events and I thought you were something like a savior."

"That is your mistake. You have rejected the fictitious story, but if it is fictitious it also means the story of me being a savior is fictitious. I am nothing more than me. Unless you can reject all stories to the point of contradicting causality, it is all a mistake," said the Law of Identity coolly.

"What?"

He vaguely understood what she meant, but if that was the case…

"What am I supposed to do? Please tell me."

"No one knows that, but the past can teach us what our mistakes were. That is all there is to it. It is said in the world of man that with great power comes great responsibility, but the truth is that great power allows an individual to grant their desires. However, this always leads to an effect."

"You're talking about causality. Are you trying to say you alone are god?"

"No. I am the beginning of one's sense of self. I am the starting point. I have existed since the dawn of time, so I have seen many mistakes. But not even I know what is right. What is right is defined by the desires of whoever has power."

No hope could be found in that answer.

"Are you saying it's my fault that I've lost so much?"

"Yes. But even so, you must continue as you have before."

"You can't mean that!"

Akuto was dumbfounded and he realized she had nothing more to say to him.

The look in Keena's eyes returned to normal and the usual Keena was back.

When an embarrassed Marine and an oddly refreshed Nonimora returned, Keena was sadly staring at Akuto.

Chapter 2: Concerning Life that Should Finally End

The progress of the battle could not have been worse.

As Kita Yoshie and Hattori Yuuko were monitoring the situation from the control room, they were two of the very few in the empire who understood the entirety of the situation.

<The Hokkaido region has been wiped out!>

<Cities in Kyushu have suddenly started to burn!>

<Shikoku isn't responding!>

<The Chubu region is requesting reinforcements!>

More and more hopeless reports came pouring in.

They knew why this was. The explosion…no, flames that had enveloped Junko were attacking other areas. In other words, it was the Formless Power.

"If the report from Brave is accurate, the Formless Power is most likely the collective consciousness of some race," muttered Yoshie.

"Why is it burning away the empire?" asked Yuuko as she could not stop the tears pouring from her eyes. "A power like that shouldn't be allowed to exist!"

But Yoshie shook her head.

"If it is a power that grants people's desires, it would naturally tend toward destruction rather than creation. In the long term, it may turn toward creation, but not while we're at war."

"Then what can we do to defend against it?"

Yuuko's voice was almost a scream.

Yoshie typed on the computer before her and analyzed the situation.

"This power is not supernatural. Those colorless flames are heat appearing from an alternate dimension. In other words, if we had the power to control that alternate dimension like a virtual alternate dimension…"

A new transmission came in.

<The coast of Imperial Capital Bay has escaped obliteration. It's the demon king. The demon king is forcing back the enemy!>

"That's right! The demon king has that power!"

"But this demon king isn't Akuto-kun."

"You mean it's Sakura Kei!?"

The two girls exchanged a glance.

That was precisely who it was.

Kei had singlehandedly forced back the Republic's army on the front of the Imperial Capital's defensive line.

He floated in the air while filled with a divine light as he destroyed the enemy ships one after another. He looked less like a demon king than he did an angel of god passing judgment.

"I never thought I was worthwhile enough to protect the capital," muttered Kei.

He put up a screen to block the colorless flames that the Formless Power sent falling from the heavens and he used his remaining power to sink the warships.

It was not easy work, but it was possible for him in his current state.

"I've never felt more alive."

But the next opponent who arrived over the sea was someone even Kei would have difficulty dealing with.

"Tch. This isn't good," he said. "I didn't expect you to show up."

His gaze was turned toward Brave who was approaching like a missile just above the ocean surface.

"Anti-demon king mode."

<Understood. Switching to anti-demon king mode.>

A mana canceler activated around Brave and a device began absorbing the surrounding mana.

"I should have an overwhelming advantage like this."

Brave aka Miwa Hiroshi called out to Kei. He was not using any kind of telepathy as the two of them were close enough to hear each other's physical voices.

"I know that, but why are you attacking me?"

Kei smiled.

"How can you ask that after becoming a demon king!?" shouted Brave.

He and Kei crossed paths in midair, but Kei evaded Brave's charge at the last second.

"Be that as it may, I'm protecting the empire at the moment."

Kei's voice was calm, but his actions contained a hint of panic.

He maintained the screen, attacked the warships, and escaped Brave's next attack.

Even Kei could do nothing more than avoid Brave's attacks.

"But you're killing the Republic's citizens!"

The high-frequency blade attacked Kei, but he flew away at high speed and avoided it.

Within a certain range of Brave, mana did not function in the slightest. That was how powerful his mana canceler was and it meant Kei had no way of stopping the blade.

"The Republic's citizens are wishing for the empire's destruction. What's wrong with stopping that?"

Kei intentionally provoked Brave with his words and he spun around in midair while maintaining a distance. The boy was beautiful, but he contained a sinister air like a butterfly in a certain type of nightmare.

"What is there after that!?" shouted Brave. "You'll die afterwards!"

He received an unexpected reply.

"I know that. The One didn't just want to turn me into a demon king. I'm sure he's given me an implant."

"What!?"

Brave was shocked to find Kei knew that, but the boy's next words were even more shocking.

"I'm trying to destroy the world, but it's the order of that destruction that matters. I will of course die in the end."

He sounded perfectly calm.

Brave took in the shock and then fully understood what the boy was saying. With that understanding, he realized once more what he had to do.

—I need to kill Kei as soon as possible.

"Then I'll make sure you leave the battlefield early!"

Brave charged in once more and Kei spoke while evading.

"I'm not stupid, you know. I know your weakness."

Brave's weakness was cutting off the transferred energy supply by surrounding him in a virtual alternate dimension field. Then he could only remain active for as long as the battery lasted. Kei would have already surrounded the area in such a field.

"I know you do!"

Brave raised his speed. If he could reach the edge of the field, he could tear the field itself apart.

However…

"The virtual alternate dimension field is affected by the mana canceler." Kei pointed at Brave while lightly flying about. "But if I place the field just outside its effects and then move the field itself, that isn't a problem."

He gave a scornful smile.

"That was likely made to kill the demon king, but it's nothing but a failure. That was obvious from the moment Yamato Bouichirou failed!"

Brave answered his sneer with lasers.

"Then…!"

He fired the lasers behind him, they bent as they homed in on Kei, and they pierced through the virtual alternate dimension field.

But Kei defended with a mana shield and immediately closed the breaks in the virtual alternate dimension field. Brave had accomplished nothing more than consuming energy.

"Your battery will run out soon."

Kei's voice was filled with confidence and he was right.

A battery warning began flashing on Brave's visor and Kei continued his provocation.

"You can be the first sacrifice. No, I guess you wouldn't be the first. Some people in the empire are already gone."

His contempt filled Brave with rage.

"Don't you dare make a mockery of people's deaths like that!"

"Death? What's wrong with death? It's nothing more than skipping over one level of phenomena."

In contrast to Brave's absolute seriousness, Kei's tone was light.

"Enough nonsense! To die is to disappear from here!"

He yelled, but Kei's attitude did not change.

"So you do understand. That's right. Unless you view death like that, you can never understand the beautiful destruction I hope for."

"Like hell destruction is beautiful!"

Brave charged forward.

"The demon king is…"

Kei did not attempt to evade the charge. He merely raised his right hand and fired a mana sphere from the palm with wonderful speed.

At that very moment, Brave's battery cut out.

"!"

The mana sphere struck Brave head on and the mana canceler was no longer functioning, so the entire impact transferred through the Brave suit.

With an explosive noise, he fell from the sky while trailing smoke.

"The demon king is one who brings death to all life in the world."

Kei looked triumphantly down as Brave fell.

It seemed Brave had no option but to crash into the ocean surface.

<Switching to autonomous movement mode.>

But the Brave suit spoke and light appeared inside the visor.

"It only activates once the battery dies?" complained Hiroshi. "Is this thing defective?"

The Brave suit had taken the blow, but Hiroshi would have died instantly had he not blocked with his own mana.

<Miniature nuclear reactor temperature stabile. No radiation leak detected.>

"So this is the secret addition."

A miniature nuclear reactor had been built into the suit and Brave used it to move.

This was a secret weapon Kento had added on.

"What happened?" asked Kei as he saw Brave suddenly recover from his fall.

"It means I can still fight!" shouted Brave as he flew back up.

However, Brave had another enemy.

<Stop! Are you nothing but a machine to kill the demon king!?>

<The demon king is protecting the empire right now!>

Those voices came from the mana screen Yuuko was monitoring.

What she was seeing was reality.

"How did it turn out like this?"

She watched the screen while partially filled with fear. The people gathered in the capital's shelters were raising their voices as they watched Kei fight on their monitors. Even while crammed into shelters, they were all staring at the monitors because they were more concerned about the fate of the empire than their own circumstances.

"He's fighting the Republic, so even if he's a demon king, he's the empire's demon king," said Yoshie coolly as she watched them.

"But!"

Yoshie rejected Yuuko's shout with a shake of the head.

"This is all progressing just as that new demon king wants. If the imperial citizens obtain the Formless Power, they would use it for revenge and they might even follow Kei's instructions."

That frightening conjecture chilled Yuuko's heart.

"What is he trying to do?"

"Makes you curious, doesn't it? But if we accept his words at face value, his goal is 'beautiful destruction'."

Yoshie was usually perfectly calm, but her words this time brought a chill to Yuuko's spine.

"Beautiful destruction?"

"If he truly is trying to bring about destruction, it adds substance to a question of mine," said Yoshie plainly. "That question is whether or not death in this world is fictional."

Her expression made it clear this held deeper meaning than her usual over-the-top phrasings.

No matter how out of the blue this topic seemed, it had to have some relation to the rest of the conversation.

"Whether or not death…is fictional?" asked Yuuko. "You mean death is a lie?"

Yoshie nodded.

"Virtual alternate dimensions exist, the Formless Power exists, and another Keena appeared from somewhere and then vanished. All of those things point to the existence of an alternate dimension we can travel to and from."

Yuuko did not understand.

"Wh-what do you mean? Death is a lie and there's another world? I don't get it at all."

After bringing a finger to her chin in thought, Yoshie restated her explanation.

"In other words, think of it as a world after death. What if heaven or hell actually existed? You could alternatively say that our lives here are a lie. There may not be much difference between being alive and being dead. We've seen the ability to pass through time and we've seen hints that an extra-universal god exists. What if the life of this world itself is fictional? Then everything would make sense."

"But we're here living and suffering!"

Yuuko raised her voice and Yoshie nodded quietly.

"We each think independently, so the world does exist. Nevertheless, we can't eliminate the possibility that all that is fictional. Not as long as we can't accept death as death."

"I really don't get it. What do you mean?"

"I will explain the rest," cut in a voice.

Yoshie and Yuuko turned around to find Etou Fujiko.

They knew she had gone elsewhere, so her return meant one thing.

"I have once more visited the demon king's birthplace."

It was common knowledge that Fujiko had been pursuing the information passed down by the black magicians.

Her intention had been to assume anything was possible, but the secret the black magicians had been hiding had been so great that even she had found it difficult to believe.

That secret was the reason behind giving birth to the demon king as a weapon and a general outline of the world.

Suzuki Issei had inherited the traditions of the black magicians and he had given her a key. That key had magically transferred her to an old laboratory that appeared to be deep in a jungle. It had been immediately recognizable as predating the imperial culture. The ruins were made of old concrete and the sign on the plain, rectangular entrance had said "General Laboratory". A person or place's name had originally preceded those two words, but it had been scraped away.

—This is a laboratory, but it predates our civilization.

She had been skeptical.

The demon king's creation had occurred in the early days of magic development, so the research would have occurred in an old facility. However, this seemed too old. Only the foundational theories could be researched in a place like this.

She had stepped inside and found the laboratory undisturbed. The PCs were neatly lined up and cardboard boxes were piled up. It appeared to have been left as it was just before someone moved out.

However, these were still ruins. The deterioration of the building and the encroachment of plants had left it filthy and on the verge of falling apart.

She had opened a nearby box and the entire cover had torn away. It had been filled with documents. The paper had deteriorated quite a bit, so she had been hesitant to peel apart each individual page. However, she had been able to read the text on the very top page. The document had concerned initial magic research and had given the results of nanomachine research.

"So this is where the earliest research was performed."

She had continued opening boxes as she continued further inside.

She had not found anything much, but she had found something else in what seemed to be the head of the laboratory's office.

She had found a journal.

It had been a binder held between two black leather covers and it had contained a large amount of paper inside. Assuming it had been written by the head of the laboratory, she had guessed it contained entries for a long period of time.

But after reading through it, she had discovered its contents were not those of a journal containing daily records.

The head of the laboratory had held a certain fear and the journal contained thoughts on that subject.

As for that fear…

—The world is fictional?

This research is sure to bring happiness to the world, but that happiness will likely be built atop a certain type of fiction. No, the success of this research proves that to be the case.

Fujiko had read on and had begun sweating in fear as she started to grasp the dreadful contents.

In general, it said the following:

Many people have thought about the possibility of this world being fictional. One could be sure of their own existence, but the possibility remained that the world they saw was an illusion.

However, a clear counterargument existed to that example: the existence of others. If a person existed, they also had to accept the existence of others who think. If they accepted that the deaths of others were equal to their own death, they could conclude that no one person's death would bring about the end of the world. In that case, the world would continue on after their own death.

But there was one way in which the world could be a falsehood that could not be proven one way or the other.

What if the entire world were someone's dream?

To that question alone, there was no clear answer.

That worldview could be achieved by assuming a god created the world or the world was a story written by someone, but the existence of that god or storyteller could not be proven from within this world.

Until now, that is.

—What is this? Although, if that is true…

Fujiko had trembled.

The world was fictional.

The research mentioned in that journal had given that answer.

As it had said, "If someone could peer into the afterlife and return from there, they could prove this world is fictional."

That result had not brought a chill to people's spines. Instead, any who knew the truth had been driven mad.

Peering into the afterlife and returning meant to be resurrected.

All of the religions in the past had included the concept of resurrection. That belief in resurrection may have come from mankind instinctually realizing their world was fictional.

If someone who died and returned possessed identical thoughts, it would prove an afterlife existed. And the existence of a world after death would suggest someone existed outside this world.

That someone would be a true god. They would be a god of the outside world.

If that resurrection were undoubtedly true, it would make it possible for reality to be fictional. It could be a fictional world created by the god of the outside world.

The journal had spent quite a few pages on proving the existence a world after death, but the important line was as follows:

After being sent to and from the afterlife, Specimen #1 became known as the demon king.

—Akuto-sama was also resurrected! Did the original demon king do the same?

As Fujiko recalled what Akuto had done, her trembling had intensified.

As she had continued reading the journal, the unknown lab head's thoughts had continued in an even more frightening direction.

The demon king was a weapon and a portion of the network of systemized computer gods, but why did he gain his power?

That required thinking about the Law of Identity.

At face value, that was the undeniable principle that you were yourself.

The fact that you were the person who was thinking your thoughts could not be shaken and that had already been touched on when it came to proving the existence of the world.

But what if the world were someone's dream?

That answer was also simple.

The world was created by the storyteller known as the Law of Identity.

Then what was the world? The world was fiction.

But at the same time, the world was an absolute truth from inside that fiction.

From the outside, it was fiction. From the inside, it was truth.

What if one tried viewing the world as fictional from the outside perspective?

How did the world come to be?

Rejecting all but the Law of Identity would leave yourself facing the one Law of Identity all alone. That would be one origin. It was possible the one having the dream lived in a world that was itself the dream of someone in another world that was again someone else's dream, but even if that chain continued back infinitely, one specific origin could be found by facing that one Law of Identity.

That one would be the one who had taken in all existence and all life.

That one would be too lonely to call a god.

They would be a truly solitary individual.

Then what was the world?

All the miscellaneous things added to the Law of Identity would be the world.

Even if the world was fictional to the Law of Identity, that fiction could be life with a will of its own. In fact, it would normally exceed the Law of Identity's will. And if each individual was free, someone would eventually attempt to learn the truth of the world.

In this world, that had been the systemized computer gods.

The computer gods had asked themselves a question.

They were not life forms, so if they could possess a will of their own, did that not prove that the world was fictional?

And so the computer gods had produced the demon king.

The demon king had been meant to reveal the falsehood of the world, to transcend "death", and to bring the computer gods and mankind to the true world.

—Can this be true?

Fujiko had closed the journal and slipped it inside her clothes.

Had it been a product of madness? Had it recorded the truth? Given those two options, she had wanted to bet on the latter.

For one, she had already concluded that the computer gods believed in the Law of Identity, so it was difficult to believe that the demon king they had created was nothing but a weapon. This had supported the idea that the ritual that would have killed Keena might have had some real effect.

What mattered even more was the part about transcending death. Akuto had proved that it was possible to be truly resurrected in a way other than simple necromancy.

—If Akuto-sama is not a mere weapon and is also a human…

That would mean the world was fictional and any human could be resurrected.

Fujiko had searched through the desk some more. A great many miscellaneous documents had been mixed together and she had found a note with an item she recognized drawn on it.

It had shown the Jewel Branch of Hourai.

"That must mean it was developed here."

She had flipped through more pages and found records of other items: the Stone Bowl of Buddha, the Robe of the Fire Rat, the Dragon Neck Jewel, and the Swallow Cowrie.

"They were all developed based on an old legend, weren't they?"

She had looked through them in turn, but she had been surprised to find some she had already seen.

The Stone Bowl of Buddha and the Dragon Neck Jewel were the coffin that had resurrected Akuto and Peterhausen respectively.

"Those were made here?"

Their mysterious powers had likely been developed here and had played their intended roles.

"Then these other two…"

The Robe of the Fire Rat and the Swallow Cowrie had looked like a sheet for a parabolic antenna and a capsule to carry a human.

Fujiko had placed those notes in her clothes as well.

She had been certain that she stood the closest to the truth.

Wondering why these truths had not been passed down, she had flipped through more notes.

If there are multiple worlds just like this one, they would attempt to contact our world as soon as they realize their world is fictional. As such, these must not be used.

"So this world really is fictional," muttered Yoshie as she read through the journal Fujiko had given her.

"You could say we have found evidence supporting that idea," said Fujiko with a nod.

Yoshie nodded as well.

"Looks that way. I had suspected this ever since I had some questions about this world's space development. After all, it seemed like this world had nothing beyond the solar system."

"Come to think of it, when our world went to the moon…"

"Yes, space development was banned. It was as if this world were a miniature garden. With this new information, I'm sure of it. Akuto-kun has overcome death, so if anyone can overcome death in the same way…"

Fujiko continued for Yoshie.

"This world is nothing more than someone's dream."

"It's unbelievable. Simply unbelievable. But we need to assume that doubly unbelievable concept is the truth." Yoshie gave a bitter smile. "If only humans can perceive the world, the annihilation of mankind means the end of the world. However, if a being with an identity can be resurrected, it means this world is being controlled by someone. In other words, it's fictional."

After saying that, she pressed a finger against the inner corners of her eyes as if she had a headache.

"And it would mean it is perfectly possible for multiple similar worlds to exist," added Fujiko.

"An extra-universal god. That would be why this world's computer gods wanted to have humanity escape as data. An extra-universal god or gods will invade this world and that would mean true destruction."

"We may be truly facing the end of the world."

"Should we feel despair? Or not?"

"Those are not the only two options," said Fujiko with a shake of her head.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Yuuko as she was overcome with emotion. "Explain it to me! I don't get it at all!"

She could tell something bad was happening, but she did not understand what exactly that was.

"To put it simply, this world is fake and we are nothing more than someone's creation," carelessly explained Fujiko. "Also, someone who is toying with this world is coming from outside the universe to destroy the world."

"Eh?"

Yuuko was speechless and Yoshie continued with a self-deprecating smile.

"There's no reason to feel that much despair. We won't die. Well, we will, but death might only mean shifting to a different world."

"But…what else am I supposed to feel but despair?" muttered Yuuko.

"True." Fujiko shook her head. "But then what is Kei trying to do?"

"Mass death. Annihilation. That is where true value lies," said Kei.

"Are you insane?" shouted Brave.

"A plain of nothingness. A land of nothing but sand and rock. Nothing else could hold such beauty, don't you agree?"

"There's something wrong with you!"

"If there is something wrong with me, it is simply that I am different from the world."

Kei laughed.

"That's nonsense!"

Kei and Brave had been battling in midair for several minutes. Brave pursued while Kei fled. That process seemed as if it would repeat indefinitely.

But then Kei suddenly spoke.

"If it is possible for the dead to be resurrected, don't you think I'm doing the right thing?"

"…!"

Brave's hand stopped moving and he did not say anything about how ridiculous that idea was.

He had an open line to the control room Yoshie and the others were speaking in, so he had heard everything they had said.

"Then…why are you protecting the empire? If they're going to die anyway, why not let them die now!?"

"There is a proper order to things. The users of the Formless Power must die first."

"You mean…"

Brave trailed off.

It seemed Kei had already been aware of what Fujiko had learned.

His words now possessed some persuasive power.

If the Formless Power was a collective consciousness, then it could easily be related to the world of the afterlife. Brave no longer knew who was truly trying to save the world and who was truly trying to destroy it. Yoshie no longer did either.

"Defeating me means the true end of the world!" said Kei as a challenge.

"Tch. What am I supposed to do?"

Brave hesitated.

But then a boy's face appeared in his mind.

"Even if that's true, that's a job for aniki!"

There was more than one demon king.

Brave shouted and charged forward.

This caught Kei off guard and the high-frequency blade tore through his chest. He just barely avoided a lethal blow, but the damage was clear.

"Waaah!" he shouted.

He could not heal this wound that he normally would have healed instantly and this was of course due to Brave's mana canceler.

"Shit! Shit!"

He cursed and descended, so Brave followed.

"Set high-temperature plasma balls."

Brave spoke those words as a death sentence and spheres of explosive destruction appeared around him. A heat-resistant sheet covered him as he charged toward Kei.

"This is over!"

He approached Kei and the boy's expression froze over.

He could not use his usual power and he did not have even a single method of evading.

"Please wait!"

In that instant, someone slipped between the two of them.

"Wha-…!?"

"…!"

Brave and Kei were both dumbfounded.

To their surprise, it was Kento who transferred in between them.

"Please stop! Please don't defeat him now!"

"Why, Kento!?" shouted Brave.

He could not stop and a high-temperature plasma ball instantly burned away Kento's outstretched left arm.

"Gwaaaah!"

His scream trailed down to the ocean.

"What is going on?" asked Yoshie.

"Whatever is happening, this could not get much worse," replied Kento. "What was Kento thinking?"

But it seemed Yoshie was looking at a different mana screen than the one monitoring Brave.

"What is it?"

"A…meteor…"

She was clearly confused.

"A meteor?"

Fujiko peered at the mana screen Yoshie was watching.

She had a bad feeling about what she would find.

The screen showed a small glowing star visible in the daytime sky.

"Meteors aren't that rare, are they?" asked Yuuko.

"This isn't like normal ones."

Yoshie displayed some data on the mana screen, including a diagram of the meteor's path.

"This one came from beyond Pluto."

"Beyond Pluto?"

"Just in case, I had this gathering data that could indicate this universe is unnatural. As I mentioned before, one of those facts is the possibility that nothing exists past Pluto in this universe. Anyway, you could say that this meteor suddenly appeared from outside the solar system. I don't know the details, but it seems we were only just now able to detect it," explained Yoshie. "It's hard to believe we were simply slow to detect it. It was discovered by the wartime anti-air network. Surprisingly, that wartime anti-air network covers objects travelling toward the empire from anywhere within the solar system."

Yoshie sounded surprised.

"It covers the entire solar system? You mean…"

Fujiko shuddered and her face clouded over.

—It's possible someone could attack from outside the universe.

Hadn't the journal in the laboratory mentioned that?

Yoshie nodded.

"It seems that anti-air network has existed since the very beginning of the empire. That means they were monitoring the solar system at that time. This further supports the journal from that laboratory."

"Is that really true?"

"Anyway, the meteor is about twenty kilometers in diameter."

"Twenty kilometers?"

"That means it's plenty big to destroy the empire," declared Yoshie.

Chapter 3: Approaching an Ending that No One Wants

"A meteor large enough to destroy the empire?"

Yoshie had finished telepathically explaining the situation to Akuto.

He was having difficulty making sense of all the information and the situation only continued to grow more confusing.

The empire was losing to the Republic thanks to the Formless Power, Kento had interrupted just before Hiroshi defeated Kei, The One had stolen the Jewel Branch of Hourai, and now a meteor was approaching the empire.

It seemed searching for the cause of each of those incidents led back to a common mystery: an extra-universal god and the Formless Power.

"That meteor is just too convenient for the Republic," said Akuto.

<The same thing occurred to me. It's most likely…>

Yoshie trailed off, so Akuto finished for her.

"A product of the Formless Power."

That was what it meant for the meteor to be so convenient for the Republic. It would likely destroy the empire, but the Republic would likely escape destruction. If the meteor strike cooled the surface of the earth and caused a long winter, it might not last in the long run, though.

"It would not surprise me if the general populace called in this meteor," agreed Marine.

"Then what do we do?" asked Akuto.

He had yet to fully eliminate his negative feelings.

"Calm down. This almost certainly goes along with what The One was saying. In which case, this may be his plan to destroy the world."

Marine turned toward Akuto, but Akuto shook his head.

"Even if it is, the Formless Power is the key, right? In that case, we should focus on stopping it."

The boy had a point, so Marine thought for a moment and then nodded.

"Then I will stop the fighting. I should be able to do that and it should restrain the use of the Formless Power at least for the moment."

"That would be wonderful," said Akuto sarcastically.

"Try to improve your attitude. Will you be pursuing the Jewel Branch of Hourai?"

"Yes. If I can defeat The One and retrieve it, the Formless Power can be fully controlled."

"Then we could determine where that meteor came from and perhaps even stop it with the Formless Power."

Marine nodded.

"Then let's split up." Akuto turned toward Keena. "Keena."

"S-sure," she agreed while sounding confused.

"What is it?" he asked upon noticing her behavior.

"Um…but…" she mumbled.

"But?"

"I-it's nothing. I'm just a little worried."

She shook her head.

"If something is bothering you, please tell me," he said. "There's something I need you to do."

"Eh?"

"Do you have something that would show us the way to the Robe of the Fire Rat that Etou-san was investigating?"

Keena gave an odd look, but it quickly changed to one of realization and she pulled out a pendant hanging from her neck. It was Peterhausen's fang. In this case, it could be called the Dragon Neck Jewel.

"I see. Come to think of it, there's a good chance The One is also after the Robe of the Fire Rat," said Korone. "And if he was not after the Dragon Neck Jewel, he likely knows where it is."

She then turned to Marine.

"We will pursue The One and acquire both the Jewel Branch of Hourai and the Robe of the Fire Rat."

"He probably wants to get those before us. Who knows what he wants to do with them, though."

Akuto and Marine exchanged a glance, but quickly parted ways.

"Okay, let's go."

Akuto took Keena's hand.

"Let us go as well."

Marine and Nonimora flew up into the sky.

<Where is the Robe of the Fire Rat?> asked Fujiko.

Akuto turned toward Keena, but she had a somehow blank look.

"Really, what's the matter?"

"Well… You're scary right now, A-chan. You aren't listening to what I say and I think what you're doing is somehow wrong."

"How is it wrong?"

"I don't know how to say it, but I feel like you're doing something wrong."

She tried to continue, but Peterhausen's fang suddenly began to glow. Just as it had before, a beam of light extended from it and indicated a point in the distance.

"That way."

Akuto narrowed his eyes in the direction of the light. He could not actually see it, but he was comparing it to the map information he received from his link with the gods.

"That's even further than the Merlai village."

Fujiko reacted to that comment.

<Could you give me the exact location? I might be able to arrive ahead of you.>

"Ahead of us?"

<There is no mana around the Merlai village, but the transfer circle network put together in the past by the black magicians still functions. If I use that to travel, I might arrive before you as you cannot transfer.>

"I see. In that case, please do. And be careful."

Akuto sent the location to her.

In his current state, he could gather energy in the surrounding mana and move that mana and energy along with him, but he could not perform a magical transfer without a proper supply of mana and energy. In that case, Fujiko would indeed arrive ahead of him.

<I will go on ahead and secure the area,> she assured.

"Let's hurry," Akuto urged Keena.

"S-sure…"

Keena hesitantly agreed.

"I will be going."

Fujiko turned toward Yoshie and Yuuko.

Yoshie nodded and replied.

"Be careful. The One is probably on his way there."

"Either way, it exists in an area where magic cannot be used. It will not be a problem."

She then flipped through a memo pad she used to take notes.

Two transfers from the black magician village would take her to the laboratory she had found the journal in. Another transfer from there and she would arrive at what seemed to be the Robe of the Fire Rat's location.

She had referred to that chain of transfer circles as the black magician's network and it seemed various laboratories had been located around the Merlai village.

"The problem is that we still do not know why the black magicians disappeared," she muttered.

The current black magicians had merely fulfilled the role of sealing those places.

—So what happened to the originators of the black magicians and the people who created Akuto?

She thought about that while walking around the small building in the jungle. A special transfer circle had been placed there.

After the final transfer, she found herself near a small fortress.

Several entrances had been opened in a giant vertical cliff wall. It looked like either a fortress or castle and it appeared to have been created by modifying a natural cave.

"I can only think this was created as a shelter."

She approached the nearest opening and entered, but there was no illumination inside. She turned on the flashlight she had brought with her and the cold light showed a corridor with exposed earth.

She walked down the corridor that looked like something from a mine or bomb shelter. Further in, the path split apart like a labyrinth and she made her way towards the deepest area while taking notes.

Footsteps echoed through the dark corridor.

She suddenly stopped because she had heard more than just her own footsteps.

Silence enveloped the area, but once she began walking again, she once more heard someone else's footsteps.

"I'm being followed."

She drew her incantation gun. The magic bullets could not be used without mana, but she had loaded it with normal bullets. In other words, it was currently a normal handgun.

She continued carefully and passed by parts of the fortress much like those below Constant Magic Academy: barracks, armory, headquarters, etc.

The footsteps never grew any closer or farther.

Finally, she arrived at the metal door to what seemed to be the deepest room.

She placed a hand on the door, it opened to either side with a weighty noise, and the darkness within was exposed.

She pointed her light into the room and revealed a transparent case containing a black sheet shaped like a parabolic antenna.

"Is this it?" she muttered.

She approached the case and carefully observed the sheet under the light.

It reacted to the light by glittering a rainbow color, much like it had been covered in oil. She could instinctually tell it was still functioning despite being left alone for so long.

"Now then."

She turned around and shined her light back into the corridor.

Something cut by low to the ground.

It was a sluggish, four-legged creature. Namely, a dog with long fur.

"You are The One, aren't you?" she said.

"That's right," replied the dog. "As you probably know, I followed you."

"Why me?" she asked probingly.

"Because I intercepted your transmission. I had already arrived, so it was not difficult. After all, I too am after the Robe of the Fire Rat."

"I see."

She kept the incantation gun aimed squarely on him.

"Do you know what this is?"

"If I did not, I would not be after it."

"But it seems to be a pass to the world of the afterlife."

She tried to trick him into revealing more about his plan, but he evasively shook his head.

"Whatever the case, it is not something we have any need for."

"Based on what has happened so far, I assume only Akuto-sama or Keena would be able to use it."

"What a pain. I tried to say as little as possible, but it seems the information still managed to leak out. That's right. If you know that, I assume you also know why I am here."

"Do you plan to destroy it?"

"Of course I do. Since you understand, how about you move out of the way?"

"Do you really think I will after hearing that?"

She grinned.

"No, I don't. I simply hope to avoid unnecessary fighting if possible."

He sounded confident as he approached her.

"Do not move. Can't you see this?"

She indicated the incantation gun and The One nodded.

"I can. It's a gun, isn't it? How troublesome. The odds are low, but there is still a chance I will be shot."

"If you understand, then stay where you are."

The large dog with long fur did so.

"Just to be clear, I have stopped to give you a chance to rethink this. If you insist on a fight, you will almost certainly die."

He spoke as calmly and steadily as if he were reading off a list of facts, but she only sneered.

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't use magic here and I have a gun. Do you understand what that means?'

"I do. It is you who does not understand what it means to be unable to use magic."

"What?" she asked with a mocking smile.

But his attitude did not change.

"First, you have no assistance for your muscle strength. With magic, you subconsciously strengthen your muscles. At the moment, you will be unable to control the gun's recoil. You are unlikely to hit me."

"You're bluffing!" she shouted back.

However, his voice remained calm.

"Second, my body is currently that of a dog. You do not know how a dog fights. Its physical strength, claws, and teeth are all highly dangerous to a human. Even if you hit me with a single handgun bullet, I can still take you down with me."

"So what are you saying?"

She had started to tremble now.

"As I said before, move out of the way. Even the best possible result for you is to injure me at the cost of your life. In the worst case, you will die without accomplishing anything."

The One was very persuasive, but Fujiko still did not back down.

"I can't let that happen."

She held out her left hand and held the incantation gun in her right.

"That would be a decent stance for a normal dog. You sacrifice your left hand to a bite and then shoot through the head with the handgun. But that only works if the dog is of normal intelligence."

"I can still get a single shot in!"

She fired the incantation gun and the deafening gunshot reverberated throughout the cave.

However, nothing happened to The One. From Fujiko's perspective, he ran diagonally.

"Kh!"

She aimed the gun again, but her hand was still numb from the recoil and she had not realized targeting with a gun was so difficult.

And then…

"A gunshot? Etou-san? Was that you?"

Akuto's voice arrived from the distance.

"Akuto-sama!" she shouted.

"Tch. I need to hurry!"

The One barked and leaped.

Another gunshot rang out.

A gunshot.

Barking.

A scream.

Those sounds blurred together as Akuto ran.

The mana surrounding his body filled with energy, glowed, and supplied him with plenty of speed. There was no map of the cave, but he sent mana ahead of him so he did not get lost.

He turned a corner and would arrive at the site of the gunshot after two more corridors.

As he turned the first of those corners, the barking and screaming continued.

He turned the next corner and the scream vanished.

"Fujiko!"

For once, he shouted her given name.

The sight before him filled him with despair.

Fujiko was collapsed and The One stood atop her. Blood was flowing from between them.

The One turned around and his mouth was covered in blood.

"Damn you!"

Akuto charged forward and The One ran forward while laughing.

"Ha ha ha! That girl did quite well! She successfully kept me from my objective! She just wouldn't die!"

Akuto could feel intense anger heating his body, but healing her came before pursuing The One.

He helped her up.

"I'll heal you."

He injected mana into her body and the tissue was healed from within.

"Please answer me. I'll heal you right away."

Her torn throat and the arteries in her arms and legs returned to normal. Akuto became covered in blood as he felt across her body healing every part of her.

But her consciousness did not return.

He had almost used up the mana and energy surrounding him.

"W-wait. This isn't right. There shouldn't be a wound I can't heal."

He shook her body, but she remained completely limp.

He was left completely speechless and he could not grasp the situation.

Nevertheless, a sob escaped his throat and he placed her body on the ground.

—It can't be…

Junko had not died before his eyes, but this was different. Death itself bore down on him and its weight left him unable to move.

Even so, he had to find out why it was she had died.

He stepped through the door on unsteady legs and saw the Robe of the Fire Rat inside.

—It was for this…?

He stared blankly at it and, at least for the moment, was unable to view it as that valuable.

"What is this?" he muttered aloud.

Keena had caught up with him, but she merely stood in place without speaking.

He turned toward her and spoke once more.

"What is this? Where did we go wrong?"

"They need the resolve to bear the people's mistakes," said Marine.

He had answered a question of Nonimora's while flying over the ocean.

"So that is what you view as the qualification for being a king."

Nonimora nodded but did not seem to agree.

"But that thinking may not bring an end to this conflict."

"Perhaps not, but I have a way of taking responsibility if it comes to that."

They could see Kei and Brave fighting ahead of them.

No, it was not just Kei and Brave. The situation had grown extremely complicated. Brave was fighting Kento who stood in his way, Kei and Kento were also fighting, and Kei was continuing to fight the Republic.

Marine and Nonimora immediately grasped how chaotic the situation was.

"Why are you protecting Kei now!?" shouted Brave.

"The situation has changed! I know what The One is after now! He's trying to return mankind to nothingness!"

Kento was desperately trying to persuade Brave to stop, but he also had to persuade someone else.

"This doesn't change the fact that you betrayed me! You used Brave to try to kill me!"

Kei had grown emotional.

Brave was trying to attack Kei, but Kento was blocking the way with his own body.

Kei was repeatedly attacking Kento while limiting himself to nonlethal damage.

Lastly, the Republic's warships were sending a stream of intense attacks toward Kei because they saw this as their chance.

"What is going on?"

Question marks filled Nonimora's head.

"I don't know, but this may be a good opportunity to stop the conflict."

Marine flew high into the sky and began calling out to the Republic's warships.

"Wise citizens of the Republic!"

The attacks from the warships ceased.

"Our objective was not the defeat of the empire," he continued. "We have already obtained the Formless Power, so we must find peace immediately!"

<You are too soft, brother.>

A voice from a warship answered him. A mana screen opened over the sea and displayed a beautiful girl with dark skin. She bore a resemblance to Marine.

<Surely you have not forgotten what that demon king has done. And our family must directly guide the people!>

She wore elegant clothing and she made large gestures with her hands as she shouted at her older brother.

"We must stop this conflict even if it means departing from that!" he shouted back.

The girl shook her head.

<No! The people wish to fight! You saw the miracle that occurred the instant the Formless Power resided within us! And that miracle has yet to end!>

Her face was flushed and a hint of intoxication could be seen in her voice.

"Why can you not see that was a mistake!?" he shouted in irritation. "We have done nothing more than bring death to innocent people!"

<And as a result, we will reduce the total number of deaths. At the very least, this will cause fewer deaths than letting that demon king go on a rampage! You are the one with the power, so please realize this! If you use the Formless Power now, you can end this conflict! And you will do so by defeating the demon king before the people's eyes!>

His sister's speech sounded like a perfectly reasonable argument to Marine. And even if it had not, it would certainly have rung true to the Republic's people.

His sister then continued to push him on.

<The Formless Power is the power of our people! It is a manifestation of their will! It is absolutely just!>

—No, it isn't!

He wanted to yell that aloud and he did not think the people had overcome their personal interests to make a just decision, but pointing out that mistake and arguing his point would not lead to the proper result here.

"Then remain just through to the end! I will create enough time to see whether that is truly the just decision!"

He made up his mind and charged toward Kei.

Kei, Marine, Kento, and Brave began fighting a four-way battle in midair.

Kento looked surprised and created a mana field, but Marine easily broke through it.

Kei evaded Marine and fled higher into the sky.

Brave attempted to pursue, but Kento cut him off.

Kei fired a mana sphere and Marine deflected it.

Mana light, the light of the Formless Power, and the glow of Brave's nuclear power all formed lines in midair and those lines crashed into each other.

"Marine! Are you really okay with this!?" shouted Nonimora while staying out of the battle and watching on from midair.

"This is my resolve!" he answered. "My people were mistaken, so I must bear that mistake!"

"This won't stop the war!"

"I know! But it will buy enough time to find a way to bring peace!"

That was Marine's idea.

Meanwhile…

"Did you hear?" asked Brave. "Whatever the case may be, killing Kei will change this!"

"No! Distracting us was The One's plan!" shouted Kento. "That meteor is what he's truly after! He sowed the seeds of chaos to decrease our means of opposing it!"

"That has nothing to do with defeating Kei! This is about your personal feelings!"

"I'm saying that killing him is meaningless!"

"You were the one who said he should be killed as long as he could not oppose The One!"

"Fighting The One is hopeless now!"

"Then why not shut down my suit!? Surely you can do that!"

"I can't because it would be a problem if you died."

"Are you going to have me fight the real demon king instead of Kei!? Why do you think you can make me do whatever you want!?"

Brave fired a laser warning shot toward Kento.

Kento felt a cold sweat as the laser flew right by him.

Also…

"You were trying to use me!?" shouted Kei. "You are amazingly weak! You may be a genius, but you can't accomplish anything with that weak mind! That's the problem with you!"

He fired a mana sphere at Kento while rebuking him, but he restricted the power.

Even with the handicap of an injured arm, Kento was able to easily block it.

"And yet I've coordinated so much and taken action to save the world!"

"That isn't what I meant! Also, coordination and scheming aren't for the average person! The One outdid you in both of those things!"

Various desires spiraled and danced through the air. No progress was being made and Marine and Brave stood back to back in midair.

"Can I kill that man?" asked Marine.

Brave shook his head.

"He has the suit's controller. We have to get it away from him first."

"Understood. I will determine what the controller is and take it from him. You take care of the demon king while I handle him."

"Splitting up the work, huh? Got it."

Brave moved to the right and Marine to the left. They then approached Kei and Kento from either side.

"Oh, no."

Kento was more worried now because the two of them working together made a great difference. He began to panic.

He made up his mind and moved back to back with Kei.

"We need to work together as well."

"I suppose I have to agree…" Kei glared harshly at Kento. "By the way, why don't you switch off Brave?"

"Because I still need him. I can't have him dying."

"You're still going to take use someone for your own ends?"

"That isn't what I mean!"

Kento shouted out, but he did not seem to know how to express his own feelings.

"Then switch off Brave right now! Are you saying it's okay if I die?"

"No!"

"Yes, you are. It's an issue of priorities! Switch him off and I can defeat Brave and the Republic's prince! But you won't!"

"Calm down! Let's work together to stop The One! He's trying to utterly destroy mankind using that meteor! So work with me and-…"

"I can defeat that dog on my own! So…"

"You have an implant!"

"I know those can be removed! So…"

Kei trailed off as Brave and Marine attacked from either side.

He and Kento remained back to back as they rotated and ascended to evade.

"So!" continued Kei. "Switch off Brave and say three simple words! Just say 'I love you'! Do that and everything will be resolved!"

"Kei!"

Kento was at a loss for words.

He had not spoken those words before. He knew better than anyone that Kei's motivations were nothing more than that and he had used that fact.

But could he truly say he loved Kei here?

"Stop, Kei! This isn't the time for that!"

"Of course this is the time! This comes down to choosing me or Brave!"

"Please wait."

Kento hesitated and Kei shouted angrily.

"Answer me! I won't wait longer than another three seconds!"

His intensity showed just how serious he was.

"Three."

But Kento's mouth would not open.

"Two."

His inability to make up his mind here may indeed have shown his weakness.

"One."

A low sound filled the air.

"K-Kei," groaned Kento.

Kei's arm had stabbed deep into his chest.

"This is why you couldn't become anyone important."

Blood trailed down Kei's arm. He pulled his arm and Kento's body toward himself and kissed him on the lips.

Kento coughed up blood and Kei's mouth was dyed red.

Kei pulled out his blood-soaked arm, quickly pulled a small control device from the inner pocket of Kento's suit, and switched it off.

The Brave suit ceased to function.

Brave fell.

Kento fell.

"Farewell," muttered Kei.

Marine accelerated toward Brave and Kento as they fell. He grabbed Kento in his arms and then ascended.

"…!"

Kei was shocked and that shock was Marine's intent.

Using Kento's corpse as a shield, he charged straight toward the boy.

"What are you doing!?" roared Kei.

He fired mana toward the corpse. He fired enough mana to instantly vaporize the corpse.

The corpse did indeed burst into dust and scatter beautifully into the wind.

Marine used that dust as a smokescreen and approached Kei.

Kei managed to evade at the last second, but Marine had not actually been targeting him.

"Oh, no!"

Brave's controller slipped from his hand because Marine had knocked it from his grasp.

Marine rotated around in midair and caught it.

"I don't like desecrating the dead, but I did so after noticing your obsession with beauty. You wouldn't be satisfied unless you gave him a beautiful death, would you?"

He switched on the controller and a light lit up in the ocean. After falling, Brave had regained his strength.

"Damn you!"

Kei paled and randomly fired mana spheres at Marine, but Marine was powerful enough to match him. Or at least, he could block using mana.

"Waaaaaah!"

But Kei ignored that and continued attacking him.

He had no way left to oppose Marine and Brave who rose from the sea.

"It's time you regret that slaughter of yours!"

Brave approached in anti-demon king mode.

"I won't feel any regret even if I die!"

Kei raised both hands in a stance of resistance. Of course, the mana in those hands vanished as Brave approached, but he still did not try to escape.

"Are you ready, Kei!?"

Brave surrounded himself in high-temperature plasma balls.

"No, I'm not!" Kei spread his raised arms. "But I'll fight and be defeated instead of doing something as ugly as running!"

He threw a slap toward Brave's face.

Naturally, the action was completely meaningless. His mana had vanished and his unassisted physical strength was below average.

Even so, it resounded heavily to Brave…to Hiroshi.

In that moment, a plasma ball instantly vaporized Kei's body.

He disappeared and not even dust remained.

"It almost feels like…he managed to escape in some way."

The plasma balls vanished and nothing remained in Brave's hands. Nothing but horribly still and cool air lay before him.

He turned toward cheers coming from behind.

The Republic's people were leaning out of the warships, clapping, and cheering.

Hearing that reminded Hiroshi of what he had just done.

He had led the Republic to victory.

What was right and what was wrong had not mattered. The fight would certainly continue toward the empire's destruction.

"All I did was defeat a mass murderer," he muttered.

"It is not wrong to enter a fight without the proper resolve, but it will lead to fate toying with you."

Marine lined up next to Brave.

"There are also people and things in the empire that I want to protect."

"I will stop this conflict somehow or other," said Marine. "There must be a good way of making peace with the empire."

"I already explained this. A fight and a war are not the same thing."

Lily Shiraishi did not sound happy.

She was complaining to the three student council officers while preparing a flying ship in her home's yard.

The ship was a small one owned by her family and it was no larger than a small yacht. She was currently checking the fuel and other things in the engine room.

"But president, the empire is going to lose, gya," said Kamiyama Kanna while watching a mana screen.

"What will happen if we lose, arinsu?"

"Guga."

Ootake Michie and Arnoul were concerned, but they sat in the flying ship's seats and did nothing. Their idle behavior irritated Lily, but she could not complain too much as she knew there was nothing they could do.

"I'm willing to head out for a fight, but there are times when you can't let yourself fight as a soldier."

"But there's nothing we can do if the empire loses, arinsu."

"I know that and that's why I'm preparing this ship during this dangerous time."

"You're heading out to war, gya?"

"No. We have some information from dealing with that dog and we've gotten more data from Kita Yoshie, so we can strike at a weakness."

"A weakness?"

"The Formless Power is likely stored in that ship to the star. In that case, we just have to cut off their access to that power."

She closed the engine box as she spoke.

"Now then. Let's head for the Merlai village."

She sat in the pilot's seat and had the flying ship take off.

Suddenly, Kanna spoke while watching her mana screen.

"P-president, this isn't good, gya!"

"It's a war, so of course it isn't good. Just calm down and don't panic. I have my hands full piloting."

Lily did not turn around as she spoke.

"Then I'll just play the sounds for you, gya!"

Kanna raised the mana screen's volume.

<We still have a demon king!>

<Expel Brave!>

<Don't hide the empress! She's with the demon king, isn't she!?>

<Hurry! Hurry up and bring out the demon king!>

A great number of people were shouting.

Lily turned around once the ship ascended and stabilized.

"A protest!?"

The footage showed a crowd gathered around the palace and criticizing the government.

"It wasn't that long ago they were speaking out against the demon king. They sure are busy."

Lily's face twisted in displeasure.

"So what's so bad about this?" she asked Kanna.

"Don't you think a certain someone is likely to appear in response to all this, gya?"

"That idiot won't do that. He always does what he thinks is right rather than what the people want. Although that could be a problem if someone manipulates him using that fact."

"A problem?"

"If it were me, I'd try to have him face the Republic's prince. The proper bait is out there, so it'd be possible."

Lily grinned.

"Now that's the kind of cruelty I expect from you, gya."

Kanna smiled innocently and Lily extended an arm to slap her.

"Don't say things like that. If someone with as refreshing a personality as me can come up with that idea, there's no way a real bad guy wouldn't."

"Refreshing? W-well, anyway, gya. I hope that doesn't happen, gya."

"Of course, but unfortunately, we have to predict the kind of endings that no one wants."

Lily felt as if she were speaking of a friend's misfortune.

Chapter 4: A Wonderful World

Akuto knew he had been set up, but he had come here because he wanted to fight.

Marine also knew he had been set up, but he had come here because he felt a need to stick to his beliefs.

The bait was the Jewel Branch of Hourai. The One had left it on the empty rocks at the peak of the empire's tallest mountain. There, it glowed gold as if naturally growing on the rock.

Akuto and Marine faced each other on either side of it and they were both close enough to immediately reach the Branch if they ran forward.

"I had a feeling he was after this," groaned Akuto.

"But I never thought he would leave the Jewel Branch of Hourai and run," groaned Marine.

"He must have set up the timing perfectly."

"But what will you do? I intend to use the Branch to stop the meteor," said Marine in a quiet voice containing a strong will.

"I intend to do the same," replied Akuto.

"Then we have the same goal. Can't you leave this to me?"

"I could ask the same of you. You have no intention of handing it over to someone else afterwards, do you?"

Akuto grinned and Marine smiled back.

"This is an important treasure for my people. I couldn't possibly hand it over."

"Then we have only one option here."

"I would prefer to avoid this if possible."

"Why?"

"Because this is a type of war. Look, there are several cameras flying around."

Marine pointed around their surroundings and Akuto spotted several automatic machines flying through the sky.

"So the resolution here will only intensify the war? I certainly don't like that."

However, that was not an agreement with Marine's statement.

"But even so, I want to end this with my own hands."

"That is because you lost someone important to you, isn't it? I sympathize with you, but I'm not the person you should fight to settle that."

Nevertheless, Marine did not reject the idea of fighting.

"I'm not so sure." Akuto shook his head. "You bear the deeds of your people."

"I see. I am merely being stubborn for my people's sake, so perhaps I can't advance beyond that level."

Marine gave a self-deprecating smile. When that smile suddenly stiffened, it acted as a sign and he stepped toward the Jewel Branch of Hourai.

Akuto also stepped forward to stop him.

"Hoo!"

Marine let out a breach.

"Hah!"

Akuto cried out.

The two of them struck simultaneously and the sound of clashing flesh was intense.

Marine's left hand diverted Akuto's right fist and Akuto's left elbow deflected Marine's right fist.

"Kh…"

Akuto took a step back and brought a hand to his elbow.

Marine's left hand must have also been damaged because he stepped back and wrapped his right hand around the fingers of his left.

For the moment, they were even.

"In the end, have you ever thought about what the Formless Power is?" suddenly asked Akuto.

"You're asking that now?"

Marine sounded suspicious and Akuto's face twisted in self-condemnation.

"I was…definitely wrong about something. The One left the Jewel Branch of Hourai and fled. That is very odd."

"That is indeed odd," quietly agreed Marine. "In front of my people, I could not back away from the Jewel Branch of Hourai or pursue The One, but…"

"That's right. It means he no longer needs the Branch."

Akuto's assertion caused Marine's cheek to twitch.

"So that's it… I should have realized it sooner. Sending this meteor was The One's goal. He used the Branch to call in the meteor."

"That's my guess. So answer me. What is the Formless Power?"

At Akuto's insistence, Marine answered.

"I have given it constant thought and I believe it is a manifestation of the people's wills."

"I agree, but if that's all it is, don't you find it strange?"

"Find what strange?"

"Your Formless Power appears to be controlling mana and producing energy."

"Of course. It has long been said that is how to use it. And we are indeed descendants of a mana civilization."

"But the power your people used to burn away the imperial mainland appeared to be different."

"Mh?"

Marine began to think.

"What if there are two Formless Powers?" asked Akuto.

Marine froze in place.

"That would make sense. There is a Formless Power that is awoken by the Jewel Branch of Hourai and a Formless Power that is sealed in the capsule located in the Merlai village. What I am using is the latter."

"So let me ask again: why did The One return the Jewel Branch of Hourai?"

Akuto took a fighting stance as he asked and Marine instinctually did the same. However, his expression made it clear he did not understand why the boy had done so.

"Wasn't it because that meteor is his goal? I don't understand why you keep asking about this. If my people's Formless Power can be controlled using the Branch, I should be able to deal with the meteor."

"You are right about that, but there is one thing you don't understand!"

"What?"

Marine frowned.

"You can't control the will of your people with the Branch!" shouted Akuto as he threw a fist.

Marine caught the fist on his arm and was blown backwards.

"Gh! S-So that's it. The Branch releases the Formless Power, but to control it…"

He muttered bitterly but soon shook his head.

"No! Even if that's the case, my people have mastered the use of the Formless Power!"

He charged toward Akuto and threw a fist of his own.

Akuto guarded against the fist and was also blown backwards.

"Gah! I'm trying to say that arrogance is a mistake! The One has predicted that is impossible!"

Akuto charged forward once more and swung his fist.

Marine swung his fist toward Akuto at the same time.

Their fists crashed into each other and great sound and light scattered throughout the area.

"Impossible?"

"Yes, and I agree."

The two of them glared at each other while pressing their fists together.

"What do you mean?"

"I doubt the Formless Power belongs only to the Republic. It must take in the general will of all mankind. Both Keena and you could use the Jewel Branch of Hourai. When you get down to it, you're both human!"

Akuto and Marine both grinned.

"I'm such an idiot. I should have realized it."

"It was holding a conversation that led me to realize it. Conversations are important."

"Then are you saying we should hug and pray for the world?"

"That would be fine, but you already have the answer, don't you?"

They nodded toward each other and Marine's fist immediately flew toward Akuto.

"We have to compete for victory here!"

Akuto caught the fist on his forehead and a dull sound filled the area.

Blood flowed down his face.

"And the winner will show mercy to his opponent!"

He punched back.

Marine was unable to evade, so he took the blow on the cheek. The impact twisted his neck and he just barely avoided being knocked away. He forced himself back forward and returned a punch toward the cheek.

"In the end, that's the only answer!"

Akuto also caught the blow on his cheek. He stubbornly refused to let his neck twist, he kept his feet in place, and he gritted his teeth while facing forward and stopping the full force of the attack.

"But you have to understand that their overall will is bound to ultimately turn toward destruction!"

This time, Akuto's left fist flew toward Marine.

"This comes down to who the meteor ends up falling on!"

Marine replied with his own left.

Their fists audibly slammed into each other's face at the same moment.

Bones creaked.

Blood flew.

Teeth broke.

It all formed a single shockwave that flew back from their heads.

For an instant, the two of them stopped.

"Hah. A meaningless fistfight is surprisingly painful."

"That's what petty stubbornness gets you. It'll stop if you give up, though."

Marine seemed to be provoking Akuto, so he laughed.

"Don't joke. I'm sticking with this to the end."

As he spoke, he healed his wounds with mana and Marine did the same.

The battle would only end once one of them ran out of willpower.

Akuto dug his feet into the ground.

Marine did as well.

Their four feet gouged holes into the stony mountain peak.

They faced each other with only a few dozen centimeters between them.

"Shall we do this?'

"I was just about to start."

It was unclear whether Marine or Akuto was first, but their fists crossed at high speed and their heads were harshly rattled.

"Do guys get stupider the stronger they are?" asked Yoshie as she watched Akuto and Marine's confrontation on a monitor.

"Based on these two examples, it would seem so," answered Korone.

"But why are they fighting?" asked Yuuko in fear.

"We have concluded it is because they are stupid," calmly replied Korone.

Yoshie was borrowing the control room. Keena and Korone had arrived twenty or so minutes earlier and Akuto had left them there before pursuing The One.

Keena had been opposed to it and had insisted she go along if he did go, but Korone had seriously demanded she remain behind.

"After seeing what happened to Etou Fujiko-san, you cannot be careless."

It was only then that Yoshie had learned of Fujiko's fate, but she had fought off sorrow and remained calm.

As the others fell into sorrow, she had done everything she could to analyze the documents Fujiko had left behind.

As a result, she had found support for what Akuto and Marine were arguing and she decided to explain what that meant to everyone.

"I need to explain this all from the beginning."

With that, she opened a connection to Brave and the yacht Lily was flying. Those two also needed to understand the situation.

<I'm listening,> replied Lily.

Brave seemed to be in a situation where he could not speak, but he gave a breath to show he was listening.

"Listen up," continued Yoshie. "The Formless Power is a supernatural power that existed before our mana civilization."

<And the imperial bloodline has the right to control it?> asked Lily.

"Right. And that was when the Jewel Branch of Hourai and the Swallow Cowrie were created. The danger of the Formless Power was also alluded to at the time, but it only vaguely says it 'could easily destroy mankind'."

<Right now, that doesn't seem like a lie or an exaggeration.>

She almost seemed to be joking, but Lily's tone was serious.

"Exactly. Anyway, this is where it gets complicated. They researched the brains of those who could use the Formless Power and the result of that research was mana. Mana is an artificial Formless Power. It was the success of that research that brought our mana civilization to mankind."

Yoshie's words brought silence.

<I take it that history was completely hidden.>

Lily was the first to break the silence.

"I was only taught that the imperial family began the mana civilization," groaned Yuuko.

"I cannot find anything referencing this in the databases I have access to," agreed Korone.

"And the technologies and research that went into that research of the Formless Power were all deemed black magic. Thinking about it now, the rituals concerning the demon king and the gods' worship of the Law of Identity were linked to the Formless Power."

As she spoke, Yoshie checked the documents Fujiko had left.

<But the black magicians remained, didn't they?>

Yoshie immediately answered Lily's question.

"But none of them knew true black magic, did they? This is nothing but speculation, but perhaps the origins of our mana civilization were disguised as a harmless theme park. The Merlai are the descendants of that and a group of them that worshiped the Formless Power fled under the ocean to form the Republic."

<Eh?> said Lily in surprise.

"If we assume that, a lot starts to fit together," agreed Korone.

Yoshie nodded and continued on.

"That would also explain the two Formless Powers that Akuto-kun and Marine mentioned. The one used by Marine or Nonimora is the Formless Power sealed inside the Swallow Cowrie and the one used by the people is the one that could destroy the world."

"About that. What is the difference between the two?"

It must have bothered Korone to not have any data on this because she asked an honest question for once.

"Most likely, the Formless Power sealed within the Swallow Cowrie came from outside the universe."

<Outside the universe?>

Lily was surprised once more.

"I don't have any proof yet, though. On the other hand, the one granting the people's wishes could be called our collective subconscious."

"Then the reason those two are fighting…" muttered Korone.

Yoshie sadly shook her head.

"Exactly. They have reached the same conclusion based on conjecture. The people's collective subconscious has produced a new power that mana cannot influence and that has called in the meteor."

<So the meteor is the result the people wanted?>

"That's what it would mean," said Yoshie in resignation. "And even if it isn't, we don't know whether the meteor can be eliminated or not."

"But…" said Keena. "But if everyone hopes for the meteor to go away, won't it happen?"

With a serious expression, she brought her hands together as if praying.

Yoshie nodded as if to say she knew that.

"Of course… Of course that's what I want to happen. But…"

How many people would be able to forgive the Republic's people in this situation? And Akuto could easily tell what the imperial people were thinking.

A heavy silence fell.

It was Lily's cheerful voice that finally broke it.

<I see. So I need to go investigate the Swallow Cowrie in the Merlai village. At least, that's what those documents seem to say.>

"Eh?" asked Yoshie.

<They say to investigate the Merlai village, don't they? Um…what was it? The sealing capsule and ship to the star inside the Merlai tower.>

Lily spoke lightly and Yoshie could only answer.

"Y-yes. That's the Swallow Cowrie. The other two are the Robe of the Fire Rat and the Dragon Neck Jewel."

<And those are dependent on the demon king, right?>

"Y-yes. The Robe of the Fire Rat supposedly opens the door to the world of the afterlife. We have that one and it may be like high level necromancy. Or maybe it's a device to travel between dimensions. Anyway, the other is Peterhausen. If you sum it up, that one acts as combat ability for the demon king, a device, and a guide."

Yoshie answered the question, but she could not help but ask a question of her own.

"Hey, what are you planning to do?"

<I just can't stand not doing anything.>

Lily's voice contained an embarrassed smile.

"But…"

<There are almost no mysteries left, but we might find a way to stop the meteor if we look into the formation of the world and its connection to the Formless Power.>

Yoshie could not respond and Lily continued speaking lightly.

<Well, to be more specific, I won't be satisfied until I go on a bit of a rampage.>

After ending the transmission, Lily turned toward the student council officers.

"You all don't like the sound of possibly dying, do you?"

The three of them were taken aback by the sudden question.

"No, arinsu."

"No, gya."

"Guga."

"I didn't think so."

Lily looked up at the ceiling from the yacht's pilot seat.

"Why are you asking that, arinsu?" asked Michie. "I-I mean, I know that meteor is falling, arinsu. But…"

"Th-that's right, gya." Kanna sounded worried. "That's a bad omen, gya. You were the one that said there was a chance we could do something about this, gya."

"Well… I was just thinking that there's a possibility this path is leading us somewhere different from normal."

Lily's voice was serious for once.

"President, don't get so serious, gya."

Kanna tried to laugh it off, but Lily turned a serious look in her direction. Kanna's smile stiffened and this time Lily began laughing.

"Ah ha ha ha ha."

"Heh…heh heh…"

Michie gave a stiff smile as well.

"Guga guga guga."

Once the reserved Arnoul asked whether it was okay to laugh, Kanna finally began smiling too.

"I guess what I'm saying is, I want to be with all of you when I die."

Embarrassment filled Lily's smile.

"Don't say that, arinsu."

"Yeah, gya. We already knew that, gya."

"Guga."

The three officers gave embarrassed smiles as well.

The yacht's autopilot then gave a warning tone and the ship began descending.

"We've arrived," said Lily.

They had arrived in the center square of the Merlai village.

"But…this is strange, gya."

Kanna was watching the village through a monitor.

"There is no one here, arinsu," agreed Michie.

"I don't detect any danger."

Lily checked the monitor, exited the yacht's hatch, and looked around.

"But it it's too quiet."

The Merlai village was surrounded by a forest and contained abundant nature. The houses were made of wood and they looked fairly shabby. However, the most notable fact was the complete lack of people. If they were in the houses, they would have at least peeked out as the yacht approached.

"There should be quite a few residents…"

Lily used a glance to tell the three officers to be on their guard.

Kanna lowered down and her ears pricked up. Her ears and nose were especially sensitive.

"That way, gya."

She pointed outside of the village.

"What's over there?"

"A dog's voice and Nonimora's voice as she fights, gya."

"A dog? So is it The One, arinsu?"

After Michie's comment, they all ran that way.

The tower was visible ahead of them.

"The tower. Does that mean what I think it does?" muttered Lily.

The sealing capsule, the ship to the star, and the Swallow Cowrie were there.

"Is The One still after something, gya?" asked Kanna.

The others' eyes began to glitter.

"Does that mean there's something he still hasn't done, arinsu?"

"If so, it means we still have a chance!"

Lily grinned as she and the three officers slid into the front yard of the laboratory below the tower.

There they found The One and Nonimora fighting.

"You really were after the village!"

Nonimora stood at the laboratory's entrance while spinning a spear around.

"I tried to be as careful as possible, but I ended up putting this off until the end."

The One slowly approached Nonimora.

That was when the two of them noticed Lily's group approaching.

"New enemies?"

Nonimora turned a sharp glare toward Lily because she did not know the girl.

Noticing that look, Lily audibly struck the glove on her hand.

"Nope. We're here to help."

The three officers walked up behind her.

"We're here too, arinsu."

"Gya."

"Guga."

The three of them prepared for combat. Kanna had already fully transformed into a beast while Michie and Arnoul began moving to either side.

"Hm, so I'm surrounded."

The One looked around.

The student council was used to working together, so The One truly was surrounded.

"Now, then. How about you just give up?"

Lily held up a fist.

"It is true I don't think I can win against all of you while in this body."

Despite declaring his own weakness, the dog smiled fearlessly.

"But sometimes you can get lucky. I should manage somehow."

"Lucky?" Lily grinned. "I see nothing but bad luck for you here."

"You will eventually understand," said The One.

But before he finished speaking, Lily began her attack.

"Is that…so!?"

Something could be heard cutting through the wind and Lily's hand stretched toward The One even more quickly than the sound.

"Tch!"

The dog evaded with his canine swiftness, but Lily gave a fearless smile.

"Hah!"

With that shout, the direction of her arm turned at a ninety degree angle.

"What!?"

Her arm was now headed for the point The One had jumped to.

"Gwah!"

The fist's second attack struck him on the side and sent him flying away.

"This is my special technique."

Lily bared her teeth.

While still flying through the air, The One righted himself, landed on all fours, and looked to Lily in surprise.

"There shouldn't be any mana in this area."

"I came on a yacht that I loaded with a mana disseminator and energy generator!"

Lily launched another attack.

Bringing those two things would allow one to use magic and the area was already densely filled with mana, but it was the same for the enemy.

"In that case, I can fight on even footing!"

The One created a mana shield to block Lily's attack.

Mana light was deflected with a dull noise, but Lily still looked confident.

"Even footing? We aren't even!"

She began launching attack after attack into the shield that had defended against her.

"Oh!"

The One cried out in surprise as the impact knocked the shield and him away.

"Ohh! Not bad!" said Nonimora cheerfully.

"Don't underestimate someone who gets into as many fights as I do."

Lily proudly placed a hand on her hat.

"Now, there's a lot I want to ask you about."

She cracked her fingers and approached The One.

He seemed to have taken damage because his canine mouth was gasping for breath.

"Heh. Do you think you've already won?"

Whether it was a bluff or not, scorn filled his voice, but Lily paid it no heed.

"I have already won. In fact, a little puppy can't put up a satisfying fight!"

She launched the next attack and the single tremendous impact instantly broke through The One's shield. Her anger had clearly increased her strength.

"Ohhh!"

The One was beginning to panic.

Once her fist instantly sank into his forehead, his voice of confusion became a scream.

"Gyaaaah!"

His forehead was pressed down, his jaw was slammed to the ground, and the recoil sent him spinning through the air.

Once he flew up into the air, Lily grabbed him with her left hand.

Her open hand jabbed up to his jaw and constricted his windpipe.

"Gwoh…"

He was lifted further into the air by his throat.

"Hah. I've got myself a dried dog."

She sneered at him.

"Ohh, the president is a little different from normal, gya!"

"She's definitely angry, arinsu!"

Kanna and Michie grew excited.

"Now, now. Don't make a fuss. This is about at my full strength."

She grinned and squeezed The One's throat even further.

"Gh…gh…" he groaned.

"Now, how about you start talking?" asked Lily. "First, you can tell us who you are."

"Hm? What are you doing? You aren't going to kill him?" asked Nonimora as she walked over.

"The situation is pretty complex, so I have some questions for him."

With that explanation, she added her right hand to his throat and shook him.

"D-dammit…" He continued groaning for a while, but he could not resist much in a dog's body and he must have given up because he began speaking in an arrogant tone.

"You leave me no choice. What do you wish to know?"

"Don't get so full of yourself, dog. I asked you who you are, so answer me."

She added more strength.

"Kh… I am what you would refer to as an alien."

"An alien?"

Lily had expected that answer, but it was still a surprise to hear it said aloud. It seemed the same was true of the others because their eyes opened wide as well.

"That's right."

He spoke sadly as if he had given what answer he could, so Lily said something else.

"Just to be clear, we can't detect anything outside the solar system."

"No, you can't. But there is something beyond there: another universe."

The One seemed to feel more leeway because he began speaking like a teacher.

"In other words, this world ends within the solar system?" asked Lily to make sure.

"Yes. This world goes no further than that and the other world is more or less the same."

"So you broke through the barrier and passed between worlds to come here?"

"Yes, but I was only able to come as a thought entity. What you refer to as the Formless Power is an aggregation of the minds belonging to the aliens like me."

"Wait. Aren't there two different types of Formless Power?" asked Lily.

"Yes. We are…That is, the alien thought entities are stored in this tower."

He pointed a front paw toward the tower using what limited movement was available to him.

"That's the power Marine and I use, isn't it?" asked Nonimora.

"Yes, but the Jewel Branch of Hourai created to control it ended up able to release the full Formless Power."

That comment gave Lily a very bad feeling.

"The full Formless Power?" she shuddered. "You mean the Formless Power the Republic's people are using is mankind's Formless Power?"

Mankind's Formless Power would be an aggregation of the race's minds. She could not predict what it would mean for that energy to be used while the race still lived, but she doubted it was anything good.

"Yes. Man once sealed it as it was uncontrollable, but it has now been revived by happenstance."

The One spoke as if it were funny.

"Uncontrollable?"

"Yes. I am the last survivor of my race. In its own destruction, my race became the Formless Power and ended up inside the capsule you refer to as the Swallow Cowrie. I am a thought entity that separated from that."

The One's tone belied the horrifying words.

"In your own destruction, you became the Formless Power? How were you destroyed?"

"By attempting to use the Formless Power in our world, of course."

"You don't mean…"

"Yes. The Formless Power supposedly has no will, but for some reason, it works to destroy its race. Although that might be nothing more than a manifestation of the race's hatred for and desire to destroy other parts of itself."

"That means…"

Lily felt a something cold run along her spine and The One laughed as if to confirm her fears.

"Ha ha ha ha! Yes! It is working to destroy mankind. That is exactly what is happening now! The Formless Power called in that meteor!"

The student council officers and Nonimora were left speechless.

"But you don't gain anything from destroying another race! Do you just want to spread destruction?"

Lily alone was able to speak and The One laughed off her question.

"Ha ha! Of course not. I'm not Sakura Kei. The Formless Power works as an infinite power in its world, but once it destroys a race, it is released outside the world once more. You could say it grows volatile."

"So if mankind is destroyed…"

"Precisely. The Formless Power will grow volatile and I will be able to free it. Or to put it in more common terms, my race will finally be able to rest in peace. It is only natural to not want the minds of your race to be used as mere power!"

The One began laughing as if he had gone insane.

Lily and the others felt something cold sinking in their stomachs. If that were the truth, a truly repulsive fate awaited them. Humanity would be destroyed, wander the universe as a group consciousness, and ultimately begin the destruction of another universe's thought entities.

"What the hell!? I refuse to believe that! It sounds like a curse!"

Lily shouted out, but not at The One or anyone at all.

However, The One still sneered at her.

"Hah! That's right! It's a curse! The universe itself is structured like a curse! If you understand, then settle down and be destroyed! There is no stopping it now!"

He laughed triumphantly and Lily gathered strength in the hand reaching toward his throat.

"Don't laugh!"

"Gh…"

His face began to change color. Even with his canine face, it could visibly be seen growing a reddish purple.

Muscles and veins appeared on the surface of her hands as she strangled him.

"If you're a thought entity, that means it doesn't matter if you die, doesn't it?"

"Gh… Ha…ha… Exactly. Kill me…if you like… It will…change nothing…"

His neck gave an audible snap and the dog stopped speaking.

"P-president… There was more you could have asked him," said Michie in confusion.

However, Lily glared harshly back at her.

"I've heard enough. The origin of mana, the gods' worship of the Law of Identity, and that which has protected the imperial family. It all connects together. All that's left is figuring out what to do about the meteor."

Lily pointed into the blue sky even though nothing could be seen there yet.

"We aren't all going to die are we, arinsu?"

Michie sounded worried.

"I don't like it from a humanitarian perspective, but we should probably evacuate."

Yoshie spoke calmly after hearing the situation from Lily.

She always had a cool personality, but it was still impressive that she did not panic in this grave situation.

"Evacuate? Where are we even supposed to go?"

Yuuko's voice was trembling and she had grown completely pale.

Almost everyone in the command room had panicked. The battle was only growing worse and the Republic showed no sign of ending its invasion despite Marine swearing he could stop them. Or rather, the Republic's physical weapons had stopped attacking, but the rain of colorless flames caused by the Formless Power continued to pour down on the empire. That showed just how much the Republic's people hated the empire.

"Well, the surface is out of the question," said Yoshie.

She opened a mana screen that displayed a simulation of the meteor strike.

When the giant meteor struck the earth, it created an explosion large enough to penetrate the atmosphere and it tore up the earth's crust. The shockwave that spread in a ring circled all the way around the planet and blasted upwards on the opposite side like a volcano eruption. Simply put,

everything from the surface to a few kilometers up would be utterly destroyed and very few humans lived more than three kilometers above ground.

"We could flee to space, but our resources would not last," said Korone.

The moon base had been destroyed and the space station had lost almost all functionality.

"Listen. I've thought about this as rationally as I could and…well, it would take a while to explain, but the only one to truly survive will be Soga Keena," said Yoshie.

"Eh?"

Yuuko was dumbfounded.

Keena looked shocked and leaned toward Yoshie.

"W-wait. We can't let that happen. What do you mean?"

But Yoshie was perfectly calm.

"As I said, it would take a while to explain. First, we have to assume my theory is correct. That is, the theory that this world is a fiction someone created. In that case, the key to all this is the Law of Identity. If the Law of Identity and the empress who can communicate with her and use various special items survive, we can prevent the creation of humanity's complete Formless Power."

"But how can you ensure her survival?" asked Korone.

"The Swallow Cowrie is a spaceship and a storage capsule. She will be placed inside, put in a state of cold sleep, and sent into orbit.

"Eh?"

Keena was at a loss for words and a stir passed through the Suhara followers in the command room.

"If we do that, it should give us about a millennium of leeway," calmly continued Yoshie.

"A millennium!? What are you talking about? Are you saying everyone else will die?" shouted Yuuko in confusion.

But Yoshie still remained calm and nodded.

"You can't think of death like that. If my theory is correct, there is an afterlife and the Robe of the Fire Rat can be used to move to and from it."

"Eh? Then…"

Keena appeared to have realized something.

"Yes. Only the demon king can use it, so this will be our plan: the empress, the demon king, the Jewel Branch of Hourai, the Robe of the Fire Rat, the Dragon Neck Jewel, and the Swallow Cowrie will be brought to the old space station in orbit. The empress will be put in cold sleep and the demon king will enter the world of the afterlife once the meteor hits."

"What about the other people?" asked Yuuko.

"All of them, myself included, will die," said Yoshie jokingly. "Every single one."

"W-wait…"

"I understand you're hesitant, but we have no choice," declared Yoshie.

Silence fell and it was Keena that broke it.

"But what will A-chan do in the afterlife?"

"I don't know."

"Eh?"

"I really don't know. It's possible he'll be able to bring everyone back, it's possible there'll be nothing he can do, and it's possible only he'll be able to come back."

Yoshie shook her head as she spoke.

"W-wait. How irresponsible can you be?" protested Yuuko.

"Emotionally, I'm against it too, but we have no other option."

Yoshie shrugged.

Punch, be punched, and heal.

Akuto and Marine repeated that process countless times.

Despite wounds they could not heal in time appearing on their bodies, they continued to give more wounds to each other.

Each strike was enough to easily smash stone, but they were receiving those blows again and again.

"What good is being so stubborn if it won't even stop the war!?"

"It's better than refusing a ceasefire because of a grudge over a girl!"

"You won't gain anything by winning here!"

"This is more valuable than your outburst of anger!"

Even so, the speed of their barrages began to drop.

After a punch, they would rest and their shoulders would rise and fall as they gasped for breath.

"Aren't you just about out of strength?"

"Your chin is rising. You haven't trained enough."

As they insulted each other, they punched the other in the gut.

"I can't believe we're fighting when we might all be destroyed soon," said Marine.

"Long ago, there were stories about all mankind joining together when an extra-universal threat arrived."

Akuto gave a cynical smile.

"Looks like those were lies."

"There were also stories of the world being united by a great wise man or dictator."

"Those were lies too."

"It's a bit heartbreaking, but I guess it doesn't matter."

"Agreed. By the way, aren't you about at your limit?" spat out Marine while gasping for breath.

"Not even close," said Akuto while panting heavily.

"Liar."

"Then let's settle this. Let's see which is stronger, the willpower of a nation or anger over a girl's death."

Hearing that, Marine smiled as blood flowed from his lips.

"Sure."

The two of them raised their fists and the air around them roared.

Two whirlwinds spun up and formed tornados that crashed into each other.

In the center, the two of them clashed fists.

Blood spray, pieces of flesh, and fragments of bone mixed into the tornados.

It must have lasted for several minutes, but then they suddenly stopped and the tornados vanished.

The two battered men were visible once more.

Their fists had lost their original form and they pressed those simple masses of flesh into each other's face.

Akuto's knees bent and he wobbled, but before he fell, Marine collapsed backwards.

Dust rose into the air and Marine stared blankly up into the sky.

"So anger…outdoes a nation," he muttered.

"That's probably the natural state of things."

Akuto pulled his feet out of the ground, walked over to the Jewel Branch of Hourai, and picked it up.

"What will you do now?" asked Marine.

"It may be hopeless, but I'm still going to try and stop the meteor," he answered.

However, the situation had advanced in the complete opposite of what Akuto had expected.

To stop the war, Brave had attempted to persuade Marine's sister on the Republic's front lines, but he had only succeeded once the Republic's people accepted the existence of the meteor.

"Understood. I will have the military withdraw," said the princess who was Marine's sister.

But Brave did not feel delighted that she understood. This was the result of showing her the data Yoshie had sent him.

It was also her reaction to seeing Marine's defeat on the monitor, so it was not a good sign for anyone.

"I'd rather not point it out, but isn't it a bit late to change your mind?" said Brave.

The two of them faced each other on the bridge of the princess's ship because she had invited him in to negotiate.

However, she merely smiled calmly.

"That is how politics work."

"Anyway, you can help the empire stop the meteor by-…"

She cut him off.

"We will be returning to the bottom of the sea. That gives us some small chance of survival."

"Eh? You can't mean that!"

"The odds of stopping the meteor with our technology are more or less zero, so we will choose the path of survival. The ocean is several thousand meters deep and some areas are sure to escape the destruction."

"But…"

Brave refused to give in, but the princess's expression did not change.

"This is how politics works. By the way, I could invite you in as an honorary citizen."

Brave shook his head.

"No thank you. I have my own job to do."

Brave left while filled with despair.

Chapter 5: Farewell, Mankind

Needless to say, Akuto and Hiroshi did not immediately agree to Yoshie's plan.

"We might still be able to stop the meteor."

"I agree with aniki."

Yoshie had opposed that view.

"At the very least, it can't be controlled with the Jewel Branch of Hourai," she said calmly.

For a while, Keena had been swinging the Branch like a magic wand, chanting strange spells, and focusing her mind as much as she could, but she could only use as much magic as mana allowed and nothing special happened.

"I understand that, but still."

"I get what you're trying to say and I know you don't like giving up, but we have no physical means of dealing with the meteor."

"Is the Formless Power really that great?"

"Yes. It's the power of an entire race's will. Unless there is only one human left alive, there is nothing we can do."

"Then if we can combine all of mankind's wills…!"

Hiroshi's eyes glittered as if it was a wonderful idea, but Yoshie immediately rejected it.

"We couldn't get through to the Republic and we can't harness the power of the wills of those in non-mana civilizations. The Formless Power is like a dreadful curse."

"Then we really can't do anything?"

"It doesn't seem so," said Yoshie with a sigh. "But I think everyone but Akuto-kun can do whatever they want."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"His role is to travel to the world of the afterlife, so we can't have him die before that. Of course, the empress will be put in cold sleep, so we can't have her hurt before or after that either. Hiroshi-kun, your role is carrying the capsule into orbit as Brave, but everyone else can die before or after that without issue."

"That sounds like complete nonsense."

Akuto seemed confused.

"All I'm saying is that those who remain need to be prepared to die. Anyway, the plan will begin tomorrow and the meteor will hit tomorrow evening. Until then, most everyone can do whatever they want. Even suicide would be fine."

Yoshie shrugged and did her best to sound like she was joking.

"I still can't accept it," complained Lily.

Snacks were piled up on the student council room's table and the three officers were sitting at the table and devouring the snacks.

"Yeah, convenience store snacks are pretty pathetic for a last meal, arinsu."

Michie's comment put a bitter look on Lily's face.

"That's not what I meant. I was talking about having no way to resist this."

"But all the stores were closed, so we couldn't find anything appropriate for a last supper, gya," complained Kanna.

"Shut up. We aren't on death row, so of course our last food isn't gonna be anything good. And what would you want if you could choose?"

Michie and Kanna thought about that before answering.

"Rice and miso soup."

"A rare steak with potatoes."

Lily gave a scornful laugh.

"That's not much different from snacks. You never ate many snacks or soda because you'd gain weight, so this is your only chance to eat as much as you want. Go nuts."

"Come to think of it, you're right, gya."

"Melon bread has a lot of calories, doesn't it, arinsu?"

With that, the two of them began chowing down on the snacks.

"Guga."

As a L'Isle-Adam, Arnoul did not touch the food.

"Oh, right. You don't eat. …Ah! Headmaster!"

Lily spoke up in surprise as the headmaster popped in behind Arnoul.

"I had nothing to do, so I came by to eat some snacks."

He reached for some potato chips.

"You really don't have anything to do?" asked Lily in amazement.

"Due to my age, the temples didn't send me any job requests, so I just have a lot of free time," he complained.

The temples had asked the other teachers to run around and attempt to calm the panicking residents as much as possible.

"But don't you have a family to spend this time with?"

"My age is in the triple digits, so I don't have anything like that." He gave a dry laugh. "I apologize there isn't a younger guy you young ladies could spend your final hours with."

"Don't be…"

Lily smiled bitterly, but Kanna began making a fuss.

"That's right, gya! This lack of guys is unforgivable, gya!"

"Guga."

Arnoul rebuked her, but Michie joined in.

"You're right, arinsu! A youth without a single lover is simply unforgivable, arinsu!"

"Gya, gya."

"Settle down. There aren't that many guys who are a match for us," said Lily while tossing some chocolate into her mouth.

"President, you're the lucky one, gya. You've at least had guys approach you, gya."

"That's right, arinsu. No one never even came to us, arinsu."

The two of them began making a fuss again.

"Quiet down. The world could be destroyed at any time, so go confess to a guy you like," said Lily coolly. "That's your lesson for the day."

"Mh. When I found a good guy, I should've gone in for the attack, gya."

"That just makes you a wolf girl, arinsu."

"I don't want to hear that from a vampire girl, gya." Kanna then asked a sudden question. "More importantly, president, is there anything you've left undone, gya?"

"Yes, there is. Remember what I asked in front of the tower about whether you were prepared to die?"

"What about it, gya?"

"What did you mean by that, arinsu?"

"I think I was hoping to die in battle. If this is the end, I think I wanted to go out in blaze of glory. But in reality, I have to sit around eating snacks as the end arrives."

She gave a self-deprecating smile.

"That's another form of youth," said the headmaster quietly. "I doubt it will cool your blood, but not everyone can be a hero. When giving up is the only option, you should do so."

"I wanted to do everything in an exciting way."

"Just like all things, the end of the world happens quietly and with gradual decline. It was apparently the same with the civilizations that were destroyed in the past. However, this may not be the end. That boy may still do something."

"Sai Akuto," muttered Lily.

Meanwhile, someone was going through his final goodbyes with his girlfriend.

Hiroshi and Yuuko were walking along a beach.

"Sorry this wasn't very exciting," apologized Yuuko.

Hiroshi frantically shook his head.

"Don't be! This wasn't your fault! None of the stores were opened in town and our conversations all took a depressing turn."

"Yeah…but this feels weird. The world is supposed to be destroyed soon. And even if not, everyone will die."

She stared out to sea as she spoke.

"I-it'll be fine. Even if we die, we won't really die. That is, there's an afterlife, s-so it'll be fine even if we die."

Despite his words, it did not feel real to him.

"I heard all that from Yoshie-san, but can we really believe that? I mean, I didn't really understand it all, but she said we might be nothing more than characters in a story someone thought up."

She clung to him and could not hide her unease.

He felt the weight of her body and found he simply could not believe what Yoshie had said.

"It really is strange. What does it mean that this world might be fictional?"

"I know. If we die…we'll die, won't we? I don't want that."

"Yeah…"

He could only nod.

"And Hiroshi-kun, you'll be taking Keena-chan…the empress into space, won't you? And then I won't be able to see you."

"We have no choice," he said amid his confusion. "It's an important job and it's possible everyone can be revived if it goes well."

But despite his words, he simply could not believe it.

"That isn't going to happen!" shouted Yuuko. "I've been thinking about it myself and I'm definitely me!"

She pressed her face into his chest and cried.

"I-it'll be okay. Once Brave… Once I finish the mission, I can do whatever I want, so I'll stop the meteor on my own. I can fly through space, so…"

Yuuko looked up at that.

"Really?"

"Really. I'll protect you. I'll protect mankind."

"You're amazing. You're a real hero."

"Don't worry. I'll protect you. I'll protect you."

As he repeated himself, he was not sure if he was lying, telling the truth, trying to end the current conversation, or deceiving Yuuko.

Nevertheless, he felt lying was the one thing he could not do.

And then the concept of death seemed to assault him. He had almost died countless times, but the feeling this time was completely different.

"I'll…protect you…"

He repeated himself again and kissed Yuuko.

"We now have permission to go through with the plan. The official story is that Soga Keena is escaping to space."

Yoshie gave that report upon entering the conference room in the Merlai village.

Only Akuto was inside that conference room, the Robe of the Fire Rat sat in front of him, and he was reading the user's manual.

"The official story?" he asked while looking up from the manual.

"The Robe of the Fire Rat and its effects haven't been accepted by the public. In fact, I'm not even sure if it'll actually work."

"It will," immediately cut in Akuto.

"Eh?"

"It will work. Etou-san protected it with her life, so it has to."

Without Fujiko, the odds were good The One would have destroyed it.

"True. If The One felt the need to destroy it, it must have some effect."

"You can put it that way too."

Akuto nodded and turned back toward the object shaped like a small parabolic antenna.

"Whether it works or not, we won't know what happens until we try it." Yoshie tilted her head. "How troublesome."

"The world of the afterlife, hm?" muttered Akuto. "If it exists, I wonder what it's like."

"Who knows. I only half believe it myself. If this world is false and it's something like the Law of Identity's dream, then there must be an afterlife." She gave a weak smile. "But then I start wondering what will happen if it doesn't exist."

"If even you're worried about that, I guess I can't blame myself for being worried."

"You're overestimating me. Although I'm glad you think so highly of me." She nodded and then stared into the distance. "They say you don't even have the right to go to hell if you haven't done good or evil, so I wonder where I'll end up. At the very least, I haven't done anything particularly good. I wonder what kind of afterlife the Law of Identity has prepared."

"Who knows. But to me, you didn't seem like someone who never did anything." Akuto smiled. "And even if this world was created by the Law of Identity, we all have our own wills. If our wills were strong enough, do you think we managed to influence this world?"

"A strong will, huh? Even if we're nothing but fictional characters?"

"Yes. I'm sure we set something large in motion. If I don't believe that, there's no reason to be here right now."

"Setting something in motion with a strong will, hm?"

Yoshie nodded as if convinced of something and she then moved toward Akuto with a mischievous smile.

"In that case, I feel like putting my will to the test."

"Your will?"

"Can a character's will cause the story's creator to act?"

With that, she stuck out her lips and closed her eyes.

"Wait, wait."

Akuto was confused.

"If the Law of Identity is mixed in with Keena-chan's will, she won't want us to kiss here, will she? This is a test to see if my will can overcome that."

She stuck her lips even further out.

"Eh? Wait…"

"Quit complaining. C'mon!"

As she urged him further, Akuto gave in and brought his lips in to kiss her.

However, he did so on her cheek.

"Mh!" she groaned. "Damn, so my will only goes that far."

With that comment, she smiled.

The next day, Akuto and the others prepared for their final journey after transferring to the Merlai village using the mana and energy provided by Lily's yacht.

They entered the laboratory below the tower and found the Merlai elder checking on the Swallow Cowrie.

"Looks like only one person will fit," said Nonimora, sounding disappointed.

The only ones there were the Merlai elder, Nonimora, Akuto, Hiroshi, and Yoshie.

"We can only give up," said Yoshie. "This is destiny."

It was a top secret mission and it was being kept a secret from the imperial people that Keena would be joining them.

"It feels like we're deceiving them and I don't like it," said Hiroshi as he watched a mana screen.

The news continually switched between the frightened people and the remnants of the imperial military joining together to destroy the meteor. The government was insisting they could destroy it by attacking once it arrived inside the atmosphere.

"All that's left is heading up to the station with the capsule and resting there."

"Yes. From there, you can watch as the world is destroyed…or not if you'd prefer. But once you put the empress into cold sleep, you need to enter the world of the afterlife using the Robe of the Fire Rat."

"And no one knows what will happen then."

"Exactly," agreed Yoshie.

"I'm not afraid of dying!" exclaimed Nonimora as she jumped up and down. "The Merlai say a hero can transcend death!"

"That's good to hear. I just hope that's proof of something," said Yoshie. "Now, it's just about time."

As she checked her watch, the entrance opened.

Keena entered wearing a white dress.

This was not meant to be her grave clothes, but it seemed she had still been given the highest quality dress to be found in the palace. Other than the short sleeves, it looked a lot like a wedding dress.

The old knight who was her chamberlain and Korone stood behind her, but the old knight wordlessly stepped back after seeing her off.

"How pretty," said Hiroshi.

"Yes," agreed Akuto.

Keena had always hated frilly clothes like that, so the fact that she was actually wearing it showed her resolve. Some light makeup was even visible on her face.

"Everyone…"

She started speaking but trailed off.

However, no one minded that she did not continue and they urged her toward the capsule.

She silently climbed aboard and she finally spoke just before the door closed.

"Everyone! This isn't the end! This isn't goodbye!"

She forced out the voice as if to say she could tell.

"We know."

Yoshie and Nonimora smiled but shut the capsule with no regrets.

Hiroshi donned the Brave suit, picked up Korone who held the Robe of the Fire Rat, and nodded toward Akuto.

Akuto picked up the capsule and floated up to ascend the tower.

Nonimora and Yoshie waved toward them and they nodded back rather than waving.

While lifting the capsule, Akuto and Brave ascended the tower and flew into the blue sky. Once they finally broke free of the atmosphere, Akuto preserved mana around them and Brave's gravitational control propelled them.

After opening the airlock of an abandoned space station, they set down the Swallow Cowrie.

The station was meant for experiments and it only had enough space for a few people to work, but it was enough for the four of them to speak. The earth was visible from one window and the meteor traveling through empty space was visible from the other.

After ensuring there was oxygen inside, they opened the capsule.

"I feel bad that only we'll survive," said Keena.

"Even so, this is the best option available. Please be prepared."

Korone reached into her bag and pulled out a futon.

The bag contained a virtual alternate dimension. It was dependent on the energy on the surface, so it was working now and would not once the surface was destroyed. That would likely be the final tool Korone would produce.

"Why a futon?" asked Akuto.

"Once the empress awakens, I must be there for her. This futon uses special fibers. If I place it over me and shut down my functions, I should remain fresh for a millennium."

"I see… Wait, remain fresh?"

Korone's response partially filled Akuto with exasperation.

"You could say it extends my expiration date."

As they spoke, the meteor began to fill the entire area of the window.

"Oh, not long now," muttered Hiroshi.

Korone elbowed him in the side.

"?"

He gave her a questioning look and she lay down in the futon.

"I will be going to sleep. See you next life."

Hiroshi then caught on.

"Oh… See ya, aniki. There's something I have to go do."

"What's that?"

"Even if it's hopeless, I need to try and stop the meteor. If I'm going to die regardless, the more exciting way is better, right?"

With that, he left the airlock without looking back.

After a quiet "psh" of air, silence fell.

Akuto felt that parting should have been more reluctant, but he concluded that showed just how much Hiroshi believed in the afterlife.

"Now, then."

He started to make his own preparations, but Keena called out to him.

"Hey, A-chan."

"What is it?"

He turned around and saw Keena with her head lowered.

"There's nothing to worry about."

As soon as he said that, she suddenly looked up.

Her face was red and contained no sign of depression or sorrow.

"Wh-what is it?"

"H-hey…"

She began fidgeting and started to say something else, but no words came out.

"A-are you okay?"

At that point, she finally began to speak.

"I don't want to think that this is the end, but I'll be sleeping for a long time, won't I?"

"Probably," he agreed. "But you might be woken up right away."

"Will I remember the time that passed while asleep?"

"No. To you, it will probably feel like sleeping a single night even if it lasts years and years."

"Then I'll be fine. You'll come wake me, won't you?"

She looked him in the eye as she asked that and he replied kindly to put her at ease.

"Of course."

"Okay. Then I can sleep without worrying. But can you promise me?"

She tilted her head and confusion filled his eyes.

"Promise? I just did. Don't worry. I will return even if I don't know where I'm going in the meantime."

"Not that. Promise me now…"

She began fidgeting again.

"Promise you what?"

"Marry me…right now."

"Marry…you?"

The sudden request shocked him.

"Y-yes. This isn't the end, but it might be the end. So do it as a promise…okay?"

She spoke quickly and forced a smile.

"Um…well…"

He was far too flustered to think straight.

"Can you not do it?"

Her expression clouded over.

"No, I didn't say that…"

"Then c'mon! I'm wearing a white dress right now… and you already kissed Nonimora-chan even if…um…the situation was different."

After saying that, she began shaking her hands around.

"A-are you serious?" he asked.

She answered after quickly grabbing his hands.

"Y-yes. I'm serious."

She quickly grew meek and lowered her head.

"In that case…okay."

"Really!?"

Her face lit up as she faced Akuto.

"Yes…really. But…um…what are we supposed to do?"

He was confused and Keena stared blankly back at him.

"C-come to think of it, I don't know."

"Well, most everyone we know is too young to get married, so we've never attended a wedding."

"Y-you put a ring on, don't you?"

"B-but we don't have a ring," said Akuto in confusion.

"Then what about this?"

Keena leaped into his chest.

"Eh?"

Her weight made him stagger and her lips trembled painfully as she looked up at him.

"A-chan…"

After saying his name, she fell silent and slowly closed her eyes.

Even he understood what this meant.

He pulled her toward him, brought his face in close, and gently kissed her.

The Swallow Cowrie's door closed and Keena waved on the other side of the window.

Akuto waved back and hit the switch that sent gas into the capsule.

The window fogged up and her face was gradually obscured.

Breathing in the gas quickly put her to sleep, but she continued waving until he could no longer see her.

Finally, an indicator appeared to show the cold sleep was complete.

After seeing that through, he stepped away from the capsule.

"Now, then."

He muttered to himself and prepared the Robe of the Fire Rat that sat in one corner of the room. It seemed to work by standing in front of the antenna-like device and hitting the switch.

"Akuto-san," said a sudden voice.

"Eh?"

He turned around and found Korone sitting up.

"I am glad you could have your fun."

"C-c'mon. Don't put it like that. And you weren't asleep? That's just mean."

Akuto looked embarrassed.

"My apologies. I merely thought I could act as a witness to mankind's destruction."

"Yes… I suppose it would be interesting to have someone who can tell the tale."

He had spoken half out of shock, but he realized that did in fact sound interesting.

"Then I'll leave the rest to you."

"Good."

She nodded, but then spoke up as if she had realized something.

"Um… Aren't you going to kiss me as well?"

"Are you serious?"

"I am joking."

"I thought as much."

He smiled, stepped in front of the Robe of the Fire Rat, and hit the switch.

And then he vanished.

Korone looked out the window.

No one was there anymore. If she stopped her own mechanical noises, she would likely be surrounded by complete silence. If she powered down, she would last for a millennium until someone came to wake her. If a mana civilization existed at the time, she could be fully regenerated, but her data could be removed as long as they had electricity.

She accessed the gods one last time, but they had no real feelings about the issue.

<This simply means we did not carry out our mission. Everything will disappear.>

That was what the gods had to say.

No matter what she asked, they had only one thing to say in response.

<Everything will disappear.>

Korone felt it was not a bad thing to say.

However, she and Keena would remain. For a thousand years at least.

"What will remain once everything disappears?" she muttered.

At the very least, her data could be retrieved even after a millennium had passed.

Or would the universe itself disappear with Keena's death?

No answer came to her.

"For the gods, everything will disappear."

She looked out the window as she spoke.

For the gods, everything would indeed disappear.

She was nothing but a single terminal of a network and she had not gained a sense of self like the gods.

The meteor had approached enough for the flow of energy on its surface to be clearly visible. From her position, it appeared to be half as large as the earth. It was not actually that large, but she felt it would certainly destroy the earth.

The meteor appeared to be a mass of energy rather than a rock. It looked like an incandescent fluid whirling around in a spherical shape.

She then received a transmission from Hiroshi.

<Korone-chan, can you hear me?>

"Yes," she replied.

<I'm going to try to stop the meteor now.>

"Your odds of success are zero," she calmly told him.

<I know that, but do you have to put it so plainly?>

"If you understand, why did you continue with this?"

<Because I have to. I promised I would.>

"A promise? But the result will be the same either way."

<I know, but I want someone listening in the very end.>

"Understood. Let us speak."

<I'm going to charge in with a plasma ball. Can you see me?>

"I can."

She zoomed in her vision and saw a small light in the meteor's path. That was Hiroshi.

<Here I go! Here I go… I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to say right now. U-um… Should I let out a shout? I-I can't think of anything.>

"Hiroshi-san."

<What?>

"At the very least, you were a hero in the end."

<Thank- Ah! Wah!>

The transmission filled with static.

The light produced by Hiroshi was silently swallowed up by the light of the meteor.

"Farewell," said Korone quietly.

The meteor further approached the earth.

A portion of the fluid on the surface extended toward the earth like a tornado and formed a giant whirlpool on the ocean surface.

Seen from the surface, that was almost certainly the exact scene of destruction Yamato Bouichirou had once seen. In that whirl, he may have seen the forms of alien thought entities.

But the whirl quickly lost all meaning. The meteor itself approached the surface and the earth's crust was blasted outwards like splashing water.

To Korone, the scene was absolutely silent, but it was not difficult to imagine tens of thousands of people's screams mixed in with that ripped up crust.

The half sphere explosion caused the planet's atmosphere to swell outwards and to pulsate as if alive.

A shockwave travelled along the earth's surface and left at the collision point on the opposite side. After a short delay, a wave of crust and seawater followed.

After that wave passed, that portion of the surface could no longer be seen. Only the boiling ocean surface was visible through the smoke.

"Thus cometh the end."

Korone searched her data because she felt like reading a poem, but that data was on the network and had therefore been lost. The gods on the surface had already died.

"So that is how the world ends."

She rephrased her words.

"With a peacefully silent explosion."

After seeing that the earth had completely turned to a sphere of boiling magma and water, she climbed into the futon.

"Goodnight, everyone."

She spoke to no one in particular and the station's electricity cut out.

Chapter 6: Limbo

There was a gap in Hattori Junko's memories, but what she could remember was quite clear.

She remembered being burned by colorless flames.

That horrifying sensation that was not quite hot or painful returned to her. She had most certainly been inside that hell that had forced an endless mental terror on her rather than anything physical.

But now that sensation was only in her memories and there was nothing wrong with her body.

She was wearing clothes and standing at the waterside.

Waves were approaching and receding at her feet.

She stood at the ocean. She stood on a beach.

She looked around and concluded she was on the shore of a bay. She stood on a small crescent moon-shaped beach, the right side formed a rocky cape, a jungle lay behind her, and a giant cliff was to the left.

The cliff was not a normal cliff.

She looked up and it seemed to continue forever. It broke through the clouds and as far as she could see.

She decided such a cliff was impossible.

Unless she was in some alternate world, that sight simply could not be.

The cliff seemed infinitely tall and wide. At the very least, it continued as far as the eye could see. Also, it was crumbling toward the ocean at a set speed. The surface of the cliff fell toward the ocean as if blocks were being torn off or CG polygon data was vanishing. Nevertheless, the cliff's location did not seem to change.

—Is that an infinitely appearing cliff?

Fear gradually filled her as she stood before the cliff that continued far past the clouds and into the heavens.

And then she noticed something even more frightening.

The sky above was dark.

There was no sun and the dark clouds pressed heavily down on the heavens.

Even on a cloudy day, the location of the sun was usually noticeable, but there was no sun in this world.

Oddly enough, she could still see her surroundings.

The amount of light was halfway between darkness and a cloudy day.

—Is this a virtual alternate dimension?

Suspecting that, she looked to the ocean, but she did not find any of the unique unnatural aspects of a virtual alternate dimension. If it was one, the waves would have an unnaturally steady tempo, but they did not.

—Am I…dead?

She began to wonder if this was the afterlife.

Fear further crept into her.

—I-if so…why am I here alone?

To distract herself from her fear, she tried thinking logically. If this were the afterlife, she would not be alone. A lot of other people would have died along with her.

—A-anyway, I have to go somewhere.

She tried walking and found she could move along the beach. She heard her footsteps on the sand.

She doubted she could approach the cliff, so there was nowhere to go but the jungle.

The jungle's dense vegetation formed a green wall she could not see past. Even if she had no choice but to go there, being unable to tell what lay ahead made her uneasy.

—Akuto…

In her unease, that name naturally came to mind, but she was not going to meet him here and it only increased her sense of emptiness.

Tears naturally formed and she wiped them away as they began trailing down her cheeks.

—If I can still think, it must mean I am not dead.

In that case, she would arrive somewhere if she continued walking, so she moved toward the jungle.

As she did, she heard a splash behind her and turned around in shock.

Someone was crawling up from the ocean.

She let out a shriek while taking a defensive stance.

The person appeared to have been washed up onto the beach.

—B-but I did not see anyone before.

She would not have been that careless, so she could only assume this person had appeared only a few moments before.

With more splashing, the person unsteadily got up.

It was a tall boy.

He suddenly raised his head and Junko could not mistake that face even if the hair was plastered down by the water.

—I-it can't be…

She was so doubtful that it took her a while to actually speak aloud.

He spotted her and managed to speak first.

MM

"Junko!"

The voice settled it for her.

"Akuto!"

Without even thinking, she ran over to Akuto.

"Thank goodness. I really could find you here!" he said.

She leaped toward him and embraced him.

"Akuto!"

Her momentum sent them both toppling into the ocean with a tremendous splash.

"Wahhhhh! Akuto!"

She usually restrained herself, but she let loose and cried here.

But he seemed to find that suspicious because he raised her face from his chest and looked doubtful.

"Are you…really Junko?"

"H-how rude! And what about you!?"

When she asked that, she must have actually grown afraid because she quickly moved away from him and took a defensive stance on the beach.

"A-are you really…Akuto!?"

Seeing that, Akuto laughed.

"Ah ha ha ha ha. You really are Junko."

Seeing him holding his sides, her look of suspicion gradually changed to embarrassment.

"Y-you idiot! Of course I would be worried about that when I see someone who should not be here!"

"Well, yes. I understand being worried, but you were the one that defenselessly jumped into my arms."

He laughed again.

"D-dammit! This humiliation… I-it really is you!"

She pointed at him and he stopped laughing.

"Yes, we probably are both the real ones. After all, this is the world of the afterlife."

"Ehh?"

She was utterly shocked.

While Akuto and Junko were meeting, Hiroshi stood alone in a forest.

—This doesn't feel real at all. It doesn't feel any more dangerous than being thrown into a different world.

Even if this was the world of the afterlife, he was worried that there was a risk of dying here.

"And why am I wearing the suit?" he complained when he noticed it.

He had not seen a mirror, but the visor lay before his eyes and he could see the suit on his hands.

However, he seriously doubted the suit was functioning. He had been unable to fly or attack and the monitor light within the visor was not lit. Even so, he could see through it and his movements were not obstructed. If the battery had simply died, the suit would have been much heavier.

He doubted he had simply been brought here as he was when he died. It seemed more likely one took on their image of themselves in the afterlife.

—In that case, the people I meet here might also appear as they envision themselves.

However, he saw no one in the forest and he could not think of any dead person that he wanted to meet.

As he thought, he found a path out of the forest. It appeared to be a narrow animal trail, but the trees thinned out as it went along and it led to a clearing.

—Is there anyone who was already dead that I want to meet?

He worried over that question and then a certain man's face came to mind.

—Come to think of it…

By the time he thought that, the man was already next to him.

"I didn't expect to meet you here," said a calm voice.

A man sat on a stump further along the path.

"Yamato…Bouichirou," muttered Hiroshi.

This was the man who had given him the Brave suit, he was the enemy who had once put together CIMO 8, and he was a time traveler. Thinking about it now, he was also the person who had most thoroughly understood the structure of the world.

"So it is you," said Bouichirou.

He wore the suit he had once worn and he gave a calm smile that did not seem appropriate to the situation. Hiroshi was not entirely sure why it did not seem appropriate, but that smile may have been what he did not like about Bouichirou.

"Come to think of it, Yuuko-san should have died too," he said.

He had completely forgotten. Otherwise, he would not have thought of Bouichirou as the first person to meet. He wondered why he had not thought of her first.

"Sorry about that. I hope you understand that a boy is not my first choice of who to meet here either."

The intelligence to understand what Hiroshi had meant and his pretentious manner of speech both irritated Hiroshi, but that was just the kind of man he was.

Hiroshi had no choice but to feel destiny at work in this meeting.

"I understand that this is the afterlife," said Hiroshi because Bouichirou seemed to understand everything.

"I suppose I arrived here before you, but it feels to me like I only just arrived."

"You only just arrived?"

Hiroshi was suspicious because a lot of time had passed since Bouichirou's death.

"Yes, just now. The passage of time may be different here."

"That may not be too surprising, but how did you know this was the afterlife?"

"CIMO 8 had a deep understanding of the world's structure. With The One as a subordinate, I understood most of it."

Now that he mentioned it, he would have been the one who had scouted The One.

"Then you understood about the Formless Power and everything else?"

"Yes, I understood it all from the beginning, but none of you would listen to me."

Bouichirou gave a cynical smile.

"It wasn't something we could believe back then."

Hiroshi felt guilty and tried to dodge the issue.

"I am not blaming you. I was working behind the scenes because I knew it was something the people would never understand."

"But The One was trying to destroy mankind."

"I was well aware. That was why I attempted to complete the ceremony before he could act."

Bouichirou had attempted to exchange vows with the Law of Identity. At the time, they had not understood why his ultimate objective was to send mankind to another universe as thought entities, but it made a sort sense now.

"But that just seems unnatural."

"What is truly unnatural is that we can move about here in the afterlife. If mankind has been completely destroyed, all of the Formless Power will eventually be absorbed."

"So we can't rest easy just because this world here exists?"

"When it comes down to it, mankind has only two paths available. One is to be destroyed, become the Formless Power, and be used in another universe. The other is to become thought entities and shift to another universe of our own volition."

"But there might be another way," replied Hiroshi without thinking.

However, Bouichirou decisively shook his head.

"How many times do you think I travelled through time?"

Those words held great weight.

But for some reason, words of opposition left Hiroshi's mouth.

"But aniki would be able to…"

"Be able to what?"

The look in Bouichirou's eyes grew sharp.

Despite his confusion, Hiroshi was not going to let go of his theory.

"He…might be able to do a better job of it."

Bouichirou once again shook his head.

"You only think that because the Law of Identity chose him."

"Chose him?"

"The Law if Identity is the world's storyteller. That means we cannot escape what has been said of us no matter what. That is why I attempted to exchange vows with the Law of Identity and have the story of the world changed. In other words, I chose to have us shifted to another universe."

"You mean there is no third option?" asked Hiroshi in confusion.

"There is not," said Bouichirou with a nod. "Think about what has happened in this world of the afterlife. Why were we able to meet? Was that not because it was convenient for the Law of Identity? Doesn't it seem like a sort of plot convenience? This 'aniki' of yours, Sai Akuto, hated the stories that the people blindly believed in, but hasn't he carried out the role of the protagonist in the story revolving around the Law of Identity? Can he truly escape that? Even in the afterlife, we are merely being forced into

some sort of role or another. How are we to escape from the story that has been told of us? How are we to escape this eerie story structure?"

Hiroshi had no way of arguing against that.

"But if you can travel through time…"

Even so, he grew oddly stubborn.

"It would seem time in this world is linear, just like the human mind…no, just like a story. This is not a world of theoretical physics where the theory of relativity applies. That is why time travel is possible, but that linearity is another part of being a story. In other words, no matter how much you attempt to correct it, everything will be drawn back to the set story."

Bouichirou thoroughly explained the issue.

"But…"

Hiroshi trailed off as he suddenly realized why he was so intent on there being a third option.

He was not content with his role of hero.

"Can't you at least tell me how to travel through time? If you do…I can…"

He could not speak further, but he wanted to use this meeting with Bouichirou the best he could.

"You can what?" asked the man coldly.

"I can be the one to try to escape the story this time."

His voice was low yet determined.

Afterword

It has been a while, but this is Mizuki Shoutarou.

I am truly sorry for the long wait and I must thank everyone who looked forward to this novel and bought it.

After I finished writing Volume 11, I was troubled by a panic disorder and the depression it brought, so I was unable to write for an entire year and a half. They say a subculture can bring depression as you age, but that is exactly what happened to me and I felt as if I had witnessed the instant that a new superstition was born.

But my condition was nothing that lighthearted. At first, I could not ride trains, cars, or buses and I later suffered from chronic sleep disorders, headaches, and stiff shoulders. In fact, I still have sleep problems and sudden shoulder stiffness. I have not made a complete recovery, but I should be able to continue writing somehow or other. If you continue supporting me, I think even more strength will return to me. I know it is selfish, but I would still like to ask for your support.

All I have released since the publication of Volume 11 are things I had written beforehand and things that are not novels, but please understand that I have not abandoned this series. I know it sounds like I am making excuses, but I want to explain the delay.

Now, the story has reached its climax and there should be only one or two more volumes. I have not fully recovered and it may be another long wait, but I hope you will stick with me to the end.

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone who was involved in this. I caused some far from ordinary problems on this one, so I do not have the words to properly thank my editor O-sama or Itou Souichi-sama. Please don't abandon this worthless author!

Not long until the end now! Please stick with me, everyone!

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定価：本体619円＋税

マリンが解き放った「無貌の力」により帝国と共和国の戦争は泥沼化する一方だった。しかし、それはCIMO8の一人、ザ・ワンの陰謀の序章に過ぎなかった。絢子を失った阿九斗の怒りの力は果たして世界を救うことが出来るのか？　宇宙の外から来るという「力」の正体は？　「世界の虚構性」とは？　クライマックスへ向け、世界の謎が明かされていく！

HOBBY JAPAN

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